



Understanding, supporting, and measuring wellbeing

Lessons learnt from social sector organisations
funded by Spirit of 2012

Report contributors: John Williams, Laura Dunbar, Joyce Chan, Mylene Pacot

Date: December 2022



About this paper

Wellbeing is both a personal and subjective experience, as well as being universally relevant. It is about people's experience, whether they are thriving or struggling, and encompasses aspects such as mental, social and physical wellbeing.¹

One of Spirit of 2012 ('Spirit')'s main goals over the past nine years has been to increase wellbeing through funding projects related to sports and physical activity, arts and culture, and events and volunteering (through 'Active', 'Creative' and 'Connected' strands).²

Across Spirit-funded organisations, many lessons have been learned that provide some insight into the above questions. This paper unpacks the concept of individual wellbeing across Spirit-funded projects and gives concrete examples of the different ways social sector organisations have supported people with their wellbeing – especially for those individuals who have been harder to reach and/or faced exclusion or discrimination.

Drawing from the experience of Spirit-funded organisations, this paper also consolidates practical solutions to measure wellbeing outcomes of individuals – from standardised measures to creative ways appropriate for participants and project activities.

While wellbeing can be a multi-layered and intangible concept, it has a critical role in everyone's lives and influences everything we do. Wellbeing can be nurtured and supported, which is why funders and commissioners should continue to support the wellbeing of all – especially the most vulnerable in our society.

How was this paper developed?

This paper draws on documents and reports from Spirit-funded organisations, and a review of their Office of National Statistics ('ONS') wellbeing data.³ Three interviews were also conducted for the case studies in the report, with each highlighting particular learning.

This paper is part of a series of three thematic reports that Renaisi is publishing as part of our independent three-year evaluation of Spirit's work. The other two papers focus on changing perceptions towards disability and impairment, and social connectedness. A final report will also be published to summarise the impact and learning across Spirit's three priority outcome areas, and present recommendations for Spirit and the wider sector going forward.

It was worth noting that this paper does not discuss in detail barriers projects faced to improving the wellbeing of participants. Projects did report facing challenges, but these appear to be more related to general project delivery (e.g. project delays or staff capacity), as opposed to being directly tied to participant wellbeing. Challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic are an exception, as these challenges were often directly connected to the wellbeing of participants and will be expanded upon later.

¹ Source: [About wellbeing - What Works Wellbeing](#)

² In addition to improving wellbeing, Spirit's other priority aims include improving perceptions and attitudes towards disability and impairment, and greater social cohesion.

³ 97 Spirit-funded organisations' reports and 60 organisations' ONS data was used for this report.

What does 'wellbeing' mean?

A multi-layered concept



The different facets of individual wellbeing

Although wellbeing can be subjective and complex, we have categorised the layers of individual wellbeing as mental wellbeing (including emotional wellbeing), social wellbeing (i.e. interaction and relationships with others), and physical wellbeing (i.e. level of physical activity, health, and fitness). We recognise that these are working categories to present learnings, are not neatly defined or mutually exclusive, and are closely interlinked in practice.

Spirit's funded projects across their portfolios aim to mainly achieve mental and social wellbeing outcomes, although some participants have also reported improved physical health when participating in 'active' projects involving sports and exercise. This section provides an overview of what Spirit's projects have achieved across these different facets of wellbeing and draws on the projects' ONS4 wellbeing indicators.

Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing includes one's levels of happiness, anxiety, confidence and self-esteem, as well as feelings of purpose and satisfaction. Oftentimes, increasing physical and/or social wellbeing also has positive effects on mental wellbeing and resilience.

"Our current endline data is showing that in proportion, young people are more resilient and can withstand life's challenges and difficulties. This is down to the relevant networks and organisations that have come about throughout the project, and also that young people are more willing to open up about their mental health issues with their youth workers... One hub worker spoke to us specifically about how her young people have been through particularly challenging times recently, but the worker has noticed how they "helped each other through it" and pulled each other through as a group."
-- 'Creative' project report

The most widely reported impacts on mental wellbeing include increased confidence and self-esteem through making friends, developing skills, increasing physical activity, and being empowered to create social change. This was particularly the case for participants who had low confidence at the beginning of the project, as staff could notice changes in participants' demeanour.

"They had low self-esteem, were very quiet and suffered from mental health issues... They've come out of their shell, their confidence has developed and they're taking part in activities outside the club. Actually hearing the voices around the club has been really nice because they wouldn't even speak before."
-- Delivery staff, 'Connected' project report

Spirit tracked changes in mental wellbeing using the [ONS4 wellbeing indicators](#), a standardised list of indicators that use a scale of 1-10 to measure mental wellbeing across four outcomes: life satisfaction, life being worthwhile, happiness and anxiety. This list is used by Spirit-funded organisations to capture changes in participants' mental wellbeing after participating in projects by surveying participants at the beginning of the project ('baseline') and at the end of their engagement ('endline'). Taking the aggregate data across 60 Spirit-funded organisations, the data suggests that these organisations achieved

positive impacts for all four wellbeing indicators.⁴ Average scores were more positive for each wellbeing outcome (Figure 1). ‘Life satisfaction’, ‘Life [being] worthwhile’ and ‘Happiness’ all increased in average scores of between 0.9-1.3 points between baseline and endline, while anxiety decreased 0.8 points.⁵ This suggests that Spirit-funded projects impacted the average level of wellbeing of participants.⁶

Figure 1: Change from Baseline to Endline on wellbeing indicators

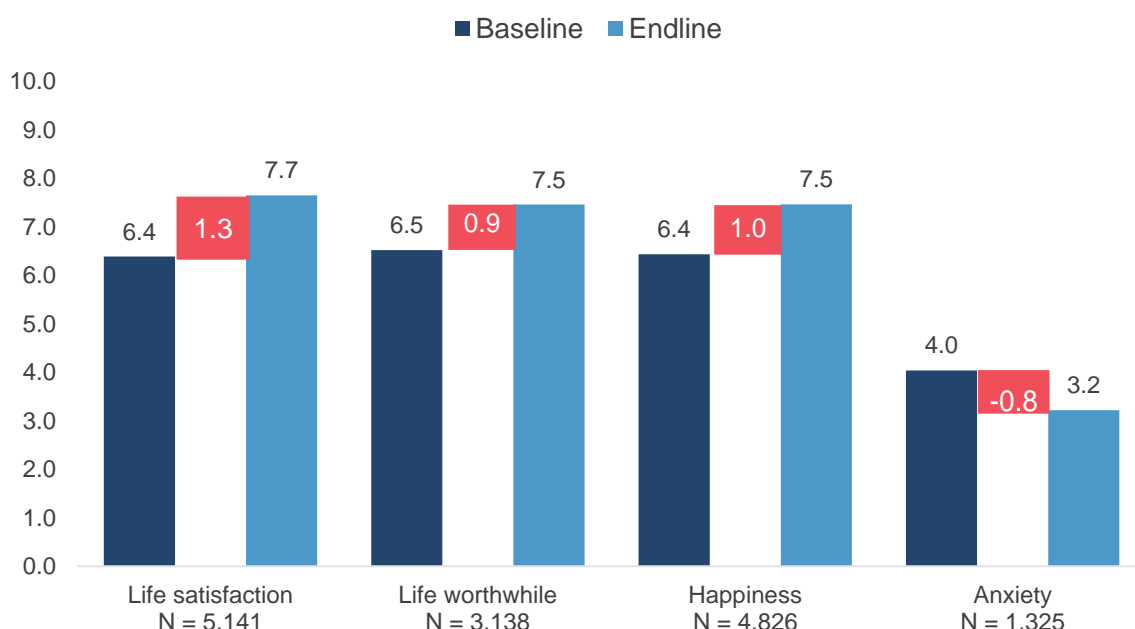


Figure 1: Change from baseline to endline on wellbeing indicators

In addition, the proportion of participants who gave positive wellbeing scores (7-10 scores for life satisfaction, life worthwhile and happiness, and 1-4 for anxiety) increased for all four outcomes after engaging in projects (Figure 2). Approximately 20% more respondents gave positive responses at endline compared to at baseline for ‘Life satisfaction’, ‘Life [being] worthwhile’ and ‘Happiness’, while 10% more respondents have a positive response to ‘Anxiety’ at endline.

⁴ This analysis mainly covers the period between 2019 and July 2022. However, baseline and endline dates for each project vary and do not correspond to the start and end of the timeframe of the data analysed. Due to the difference in number of responses between baseline and endline data, this analysis only includes projects where this difference is no larger than 35%. The data collected by projects varies across the wellbeing outcomes (for instance, there is less data on the anxiety outcome than life satisfaction, which potentially affects the degree to which findings can be generalised for all projects). In some cases, only baseline scores were collected which does not allow for distance travel analysis. Taking into account the data limitations described above, 38 projects were included in this analysis, while a further 29 projects were excluded due to either low-quality data or data collection not having finished at the time of this analysis.

⁵ Unlike the other wellbeing outcomes, lower scores in anxiety indicate more positive outcomes.

⁶ It is worth noting that Spirit participants at baseline tended to have lower than average wellbeing according to the ONS4 wellbeing indicators. Comparing Spirit’s data with [national averages from March 2012 – March 2021](#) shows that Spirit participants on average demonstrated lower wellbeing with respect to all indicators. This is the case even when selecting for national results indicating the lowest wellbeing (6.4 compared to 7.4 for life satisfaction, 6.5 compared to 7.6 for life being worthwhile, 6.4 compared to 7.2 for happiness, and 4.0 compared to 3.4 for anxiety).

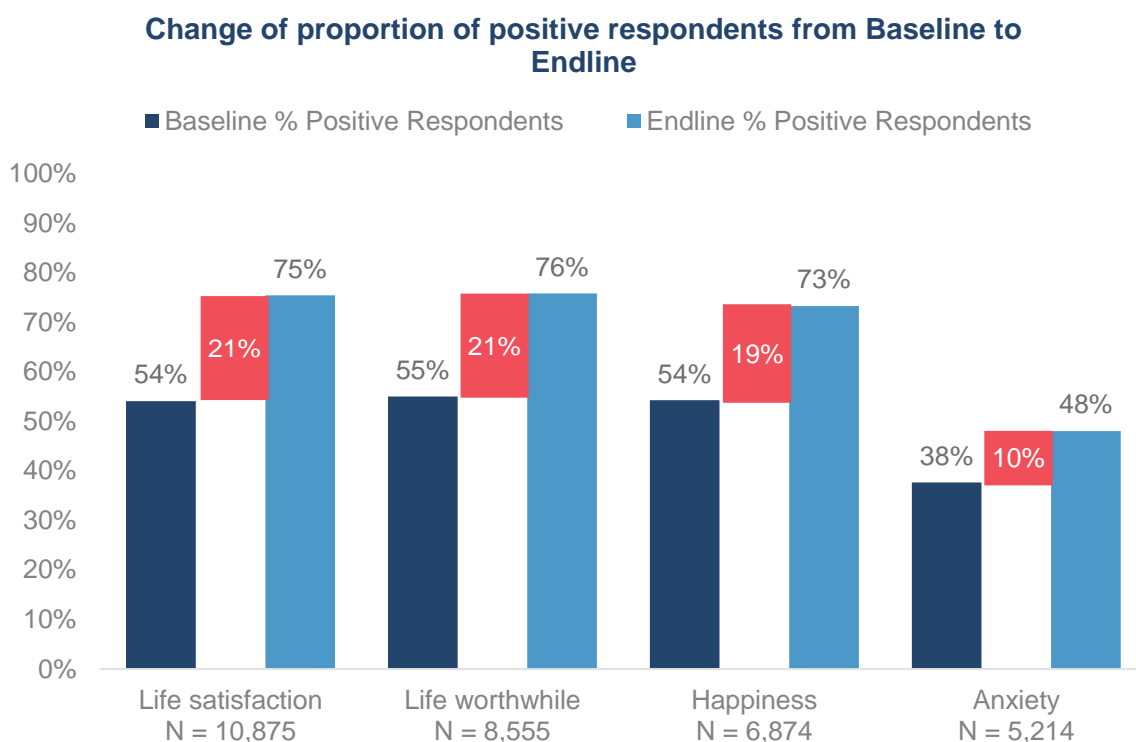


Figure 2: Change in proportion of respondents giving positive scores from baseline to endline

Social wellbeing

All Spirit-funded projects involved some social element, with many aiming to improve the social wellbeing of participants. This includes creating opportunities for people to form social connections and friendships with fellow participants, as well as delivery staff and volunteers. Many Spirit-funded organisations observed reductions in loneliness and isolation on their projects, especially for participants that were identified as at risk. For example, the projects under the Carers Music Fund engaged carers in creative projects to improve their wellbeing. These social connections were especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic and periods of lockdown. Projects switching to remote delivery kept regular contact with participants and hosted online peer spaces to help ensure participants were able to maintain these relationships during the pandemic.

“It has been a difficult year but the [participants] felt that taking part even remotely helped improve their wellbeing - keeping them connected to like-minded people and taking them away from the stress of lockdown by interacting, performing, chatting, learning music and generally socialising via Zoom.”
-- ‘Creative’ project report

Physical wellbeing

Spirit-funded organisations under the ‘Active’ portfolio typically delivered sports and exercise as a means of improving mental and social wellbeing of participants. Nevertheless, some participants also reported improved physical fitness due to their participation in sports. There is robust scientific research on the benefits of exercise to

reducing loneliness and depression,⁷ with many projects reporting improved physical fitness alongside boosted social and mental wellbeing.

“Another parent discussed the positive impact of [the Spirit-funded organisation’s] sessions in relation to the regular physical therapy sessions her child received. In particular, they felt that [the Spirit-funded organisation] allowed their child to develop their physical abilities in a meaningful way which also allowed them to develop their social skills and apply them in different settings.”

-- ‘Active’ project report

Projects such as *Sirens for Success* (led by Netball Scotland) and *Flyerz Hockey* (Active Sport) focused on a single sport, while others, such as *Get Out, Get Active* (GOGA, led by Activity Alliance) focused on fitness more broadly, delivering a range of sports and exercise activities. Often projects focused on sports and exercise used quantitative measures to track increases in the activity levels of participants. For example, GOGA reporting that 60% of their least active participants had increased their participation on sports and exercise by the end of the second year of delivery, while *Sirens for Success* recorded increases in the participation rates and effort for pupils in PE classes.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

It is worth noting that a lot of the projects included in this report were delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many projects highlighted the pandemic as the single biggest challenge to the mental, physical, and social wellbeing of participants. This is also the case at a national level, as the ONS census indicated the biggest deterioration in all wellbeing scores in the year ending March 2021 during the pandemic, and while average ratings of personal wellbeing in the UK improved in the year ending March 2022, they remained below pre-coronavirus pandemic levels.⁸

From a project delivery perspective, persistent lockdowns meant that Spirit-funded organisations were unable to deliver projects as intended. This included needing to change to remote delivery where possible, delivering essentials like food and medicine, and having staff on furlough.

While the pandemic presented a massive challenge to the wellbeing of participants, some Spirit-funded organisations nevertheless reported closer relationships with participants due to the extra effort made to support them in a challenging time.

“In spite of the massive negative impacts Covid-19 has had on society we believe that our relationships with [participants] has actually improved. We believe this is a direct result of us continuing to support families in a number of different ways throughout the most difficult periods of the year. We provided food parcels, online classes, a comprehensive summer programme, evening activities, volunteering

⁷ Chen, Weiyun and Zhang, Zhanjia, A systematic review of the relationship between physical activity and happiness, Journal of Happiness Studies, April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/02/well/move/even-a-little-exercise-might-make-us-happier.html>

⁸ Personal wellbeing in the UK: April 2021 to March 2022, Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/measuringnationalwellbeing/april2021tomarch2022>

opportunities and ultimately we always tried to make ourselves available to help when needed.”
-- ‘Active’ project report

Who has been impacted

Spirit of 2012 has sought to impact the wellbeing of a range of individuals and communities. Figure 3 displays a demographic breakdown of Spirit’s participants, indicating the different groups that grantees have sort to work with. Over half of participants are aged 25 and under (54%) and/or female (64%), and 41% of participants were disabled.

Figure 3: Demographic breakdown of Spirit participants

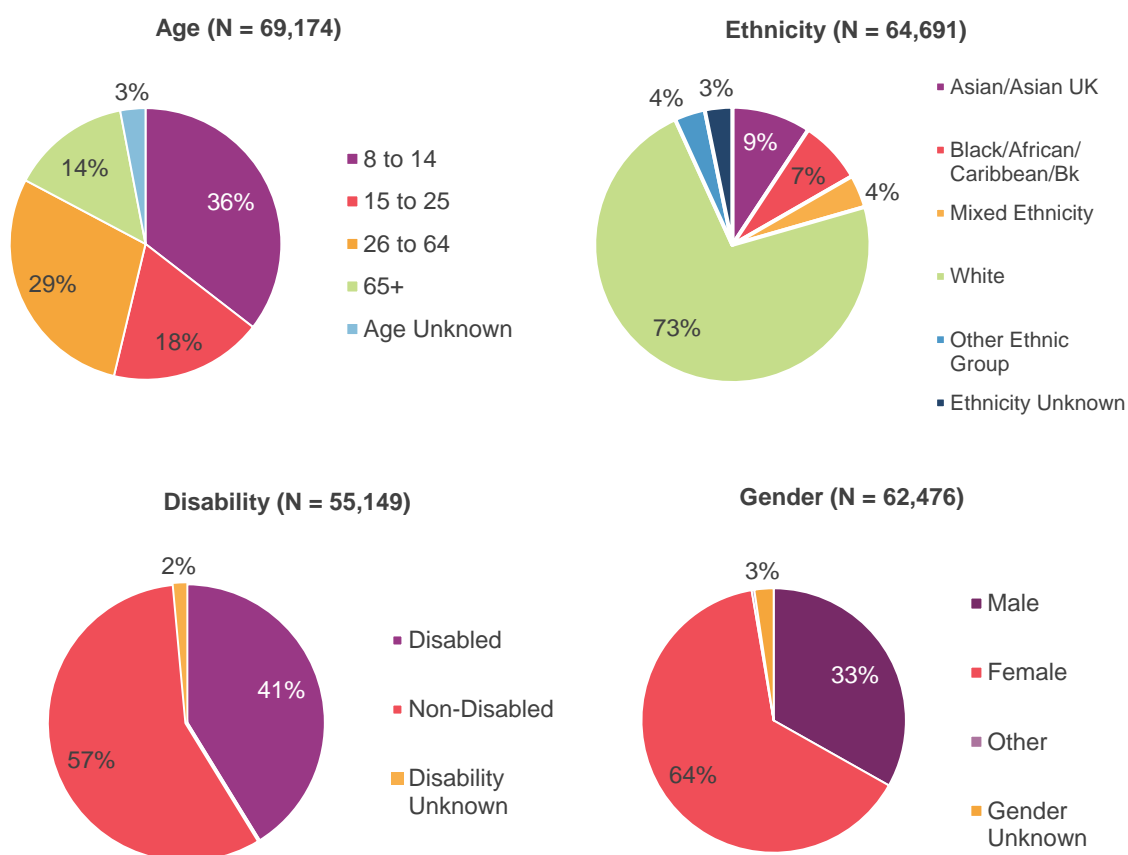


Figure 3: Demographic breakdown of Spirit participants

The demographics are reflected by the different strands of Spirit funding that were designed specifically to target different groups, such as the following funding streams:

- The **Carers’ Music Fund** supported music projects for women and girls with caring responsibilities. Projects such as *Hidden Voices* (Midland Arts Centre) and *Monster Extraction* (My Pockets) provided opportunities for participants to engage in music to develop their skills, self-esteem, and confidence.
- The **Challenge Funds** supported projects aimed at engaging Disabled and non-Disabled people through inclusive participation, where all would participate together as equals regardless of their impairment. This included both Creative and Active projects,

with *Viewfinder* (Beacon Films CIC) and *Cultural Shift* (ARC Stockton) focusing on showcasing the work of Disabled artists, and *City to Sea* (The Wave Project) and *Flyerz* engaging participants in surfing and hockey respectively.

- The **Sporting Equality Fund** which worked with the Scottish Government to provide support to 14 projects for women and girls to participate in sport and physical activity, keep active, and improve their mental and physical wellbeing. This includes organisations like Netball Scotland, Scottish Sports Futures, and Scottish Youth Dance.
- The **Changing Lives Fund**, a partnership between the Scottish Government, sportscotland, and the Robertson Trust, which aimed to increase the capacity and skills of people in the sporting sector to increase inclusion, health and wellbeing, skills and community participation.

In addition to project participants, a few Spirit-funded organisations recognised that delivering projects could negatively impact the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers since oftentimes the emotional intensity of pastoral care and attention for participants could lead to burnout. Hence, some Spirit-funded organisations have provided support for their staff and volunteers in the form of counselling services, informal and regular check-ins, and other wraparound support for personal and skills development to ensure staff and volunteers felt they were valued and had the space to grow and develop.

Case study 1: Achieving multiple wellbeing outcomes

Critical Mass is a dance project aimed at showing how genuine inclusion can be achieved in large events such as the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games. The participants are Disabled and non-Disabled young people aged 16-30 from different backgrounds across the Midlands. Over one-third of participants (40%) identify as Disabled. *Critical Mass* is open to all participants, regardless of their dance experience, and is tailored to different access needs to ensure the project is as inclusive as possible.

While sessions focus on dance and physical activity, *Critical Mass* seeks to use exercise as a way to impact the mental wellbeing of participants. For example, parents and carers have shared how participants grew in confidence, became more independent and developed outside of the project after taking part in *Critical Mass*.

“Some parents have young people who are nonverbal, having huge milestones throughout the project... you have beautiful stories, phone calls, where parents have been crying down the phone, because their son has done this thing for the first time in their life.”

Critical Mass tries to strike a delicate balance when delivering activities: they need to be challenging enough to keep all participants engaged and feel a sense of accomplishment yet should not cause participants to burn out physically or mentally. Staff have been quick to learn and adapt their project such as the length of rehearsals, types of activities, and when to take breaks, to ensure that sessions were suited to the diverse needs of participants.

Participants form new social connections naturally over the course of the *Critical Mass* project. Close friendships have developed in the weekly sessions, given the same participants attend for a prolonged period of time.

“They’ve been able to build these friendships over the last year... We’ve got beautiful stories of participants who have gained in confidence, who have had gone and got their first ever job, who are making friendships for life, talking about people going to their weddings, and it’s just that social side of things.”

Critical Mass does not just consider its wellbeing impact on participants. The wellbeing of parents and carers – the ‘extended family’ as *Critical Mass* describes them – is also important. The project offers opportunities for parents and carers to come together, share stories and connect over their shared experience. There are also regular wellbeing check-ins for staff, with additional coaching being offered where needed. An emphasis on upskilling staff, such as providing individuals opportunities to lead sessions, help boost confidence and help individuals to grow.

“So it’s all about checking-in... it’s a time for the entire cohort of our staff and delivery team to get together and help each other out and discuss what their challenges are... We also offer extra coaching and external support, and we’ve had a couple of leaders take that up through the process.”

Critical Mass demonstrates how a project can have multiple impacts on wellbeing, both in terms of who was impacted across participants, staff, parents and carers, but also the different kinds of wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental and social aspects.



How can social sector organisations support people's wellbeing?

Lessons learnt on what to do, and how

Activities that supported wellbeing

Spirit supported a range of projects through their 'Active', 'Creative' and 'Connected' funding strands to improve individuals' wellbeing. Below is an overview of the types of projects Spirit-funded organisations delivered, and how they improved participants' wellbeing.

- **Expression through creativity:** Spirit-funded organisations delivering creative activities, such as making music, creating artwork and telling stories, have helped participants express themselves and process complex emotions. These include the projects of the Carers Music Fund, with space created for participants use music as a means of self-expression and sharing experiences.

"Young carers have talked to us about using music to express themselves through writing their own lyrics and developing confidence and skills in using musical instruments and technical equipment, helping them to have a sense of achievement in completing their own music that tells their story. For some carers, the fundamental act of listening to music alone with headphones, re-living times in their lives, escaping from the day-to-day stress of caring through the pandemic, relaxing and recharging, has opened up new and easily accessible ways of taking time for themselves and reconnecting with their own identity outside of caring."
-- 'Creative' project report

- **Developing and showcasing skills:** Many Spirit-funded organisations that delivered arts or sports activities included some element of showing the work of participants to the public, such as music performances, art exhibitions or sports games. Showcasing the work of participants helped improve their confidence and developed a sense of achievement.

"Confidence is high in the performance group and everyone is happy with their contribution to the Edinburgh performances, to the point where they have asked to perform the piece again locally, but also now feel they have the skills to choreograph new work of their own."
-- 'Active' project report

- **Sports and exercise:** Participants engaged in 'Active' programmes often spoke of improved physical health and self-confidence after taking part in sports and exercise.

"Many teenagers and adults that had struggled to engage during lockdown, were keen to go to their local gym for a workout. I supported several family members to attend their gym induction and subsequent gym sessions to build their confidence both in being in public spaces with others and also for using the gym. This had such a benefit on their mental wellbeing as well as their physical wellbeing."
-- 'Active' project report

- **Taking up a cause:** A significant portion of Spirit's portfolio include organisations that deliver social action projects that saw improvements in the confidence of participants and feelings of purpose through contributing to a cause that resonated with them. For example, *EmpowHER* (UK Youth) was launched to mark the centenary of women's suffrage by engaging young women and girls with low wellbeing in social action opportunities. Volunteering projects recorded improvements in confidence, increased feelings of purpose, and new social connections for their participants.

“Feedback indicates that the emergency response effort [to Covid-19] has been mutually beneficial to both volunteers and residents. Volunteers report it has given them a purpose during uncertain and often lonely times and, in some cases, opened their eyes to the needs of local communities.”

-- ‘Connected’ project report

- **Increasing understanding of wellbeing:** Many Spirit-funded organisations sought to empower participants by increasing their understanding of wellbeing, such as encouraging healthy behaviours like mindfulness meditation and exercise.

“We have delivered online content including fitness and yoga sessions, group mental health and addiction workshops, and online social events which have been a great success.”

-- ‘Active’ grantee report

How activities were delivered to support wellbeing

Across these different projects, there are some key learnings about the approach taken to deliver activities that helped improve the wellbeing of participants, staff, and volunteers.

- **Creating a welcoming and non-judgmental environment** helped participants feel comfortable engaging in sessions. This was highlighted as particularly important for groups such as Disabled people, young people who struggled at school, and ex-offenders, as these participants often had felt unwelcome in other settings. This environment helped participants **build trust** with staff and volunteers, which helped participants feel more comfortable engaging in activities.

“The fact that we welcome people without asking questions or stigmatising them creates a positive environment to engage with players in... These key elements to our general approach to service delivery have proved essential to delivery in a criminal justice setting.”

-- ‘Active’ project report

- The **expertise of staff and volunteers** was highlighted as crucial to the success of projects in improving wellbeing (alongside other project outcomes). Many organisations collaborated with specialist organisations or hired staff with specific skill sets for project delivery, recognising that better quality delivery will lead to greater improvements in the wellbeing of participants. For example, in Spirit’s creative portfolio of projects, having artist practitioners who had experience in teaching better enabled participants to increase their skills, leading to increased confidence and self-esteem. Expertise in accessibility and inclusive participation was especially important for facilitating the participation of people with complex needs.

“[The project] benefitted from [the Spirit-funded organisation’s] network of 11 youth organisations that brought knowledge and expertise of the local context to the programme. This helped the programme target the “unusual suspects” by adapting the programme to the needs and interests of the target audience.”

-- ‘Connected’ project report

- **Consistency** in terms of having a clear structure and purpose in sessions helped participants feel comfortable as they knew what to expect, develop a routine, and build trust in the process. Participating consistently also enabled skills to develop over the course of a project. On the other hand, embedding some **flexibility and decision-**

making for participants (e.g. allowing participants to select different instruments or genres in music workshops) helped staff tailor sessions to participants' interests and level of difficulty. Flexibility over time and date also helped make activities more accessible for participants with little free time, such as young carers. Therefore, it is important to **balance consistency and flexibility** in project delivery, and adapting to the needs of participants.

“Learning to adapt to a shifting and sporadic attendee patterns and still maintain some continuity through the weekly sessions. To be flexible and listen to participants, but also try to learn the best time to intervene and move the session along creatively.”

-- 'Creative' project report

- **Progression opportunities** allowed participants and volunteers to boost their confidence by developing skills and experience, as well as ensuring that sessions remained engaging and challenging. **Recognising and rewarding** the progress of participants and volunteers also helped build confidence. This was especially important for participants and volunteers taking on roles of responsibility in projects in feeling that their time and commitment were valued.

“The celebration events were key to ensuring volunteers felt valued and special, creating a sense of community through coming together en masse... Volunteers reminiscence about the two celebration events in the summer and winter of 2017 demonstrated the impact that these moments of recognition had. For many, they were a significant memory in their volunteering journey.”

-- 'Connected' project report

- **Opportunities to chat and socialise** outside of the main project activities were important for fostering social connections between participants. This finding suggests that these opportunities should be factored into the design of sessions by reserving time outside of the core activities to allow room for relationships and conversations to develop organically.

“The initial tea and coffee break offered after sessions has been enhanced by the groups, with a number of them organising their own [social outings]... This greatly enhances the additional benefits of engaging in the programme demonstrating the ability to connect communities, building friendships, tackling isolation and improving mental wellbeing.”

-- 'Active' project report

Case study 2: How flexibility and trust helped to achieve wellbeing impact

Spirit's grant to Coventry City of Culture Trust was used to roll out a programme of cultural events co-produced with residents. These events aimed to address the city's most significant social issues. Four organisations worked in partnership to involve a diverse and vulnerable cohort of participants, including individuals with experience of homelessness or the criminal justice system, young people not in education, employment or training, care home residents, people experiencing isolation, loneliness or struggling with mental health, as well as refugees and asylum seekers.

Different project activities brought together local communities together, and fostered connections between participants which countered loneliness at a time when people were feeling isolated coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“A 75-year-old became really strong friends with a 21-year-old, and they now go for a coffee and make sure each of them is alright, which would have never happened if it wasn't for the project. So the projects really do create that social net for people.”

The programme also used arts and creativity to raise awareness of mental wellbeing. One project provided a platform for participants to share their experiences of homelessness, which helped local authorities understand the impact of homelessness on mental wellbeing, and see the value of lived experience when designing and delivering services.

“Using arts and culture as a platform for their voices and their stories and their lived experience really shows actually the impact of homelessness on an individual, which allowed the Council to go, ‘actually, we can better understand the people we work with by doing this.’ So they really bought into it and that was really powerful.”

While it was originally intended for participants to complete only one project, many people participated in several, which meant that staff could work with some individuals over longer periods of time. This enabled staff and participants to develop trust, which was critical for participants to open up and share their experiences. The flexibility of delivery staff and Spirit as a funder helped change the structure of the programme, shifting from larger to smaller numbers of participants engaging over a longer timeframe, and was important for building these relationships and deep, meaningful engagement with the programme

“This [the benefit of engaging in several projects] was an unintended outcome... it was originally intended participants would do one project then move on but the reality is they moved onto further projects.”

How can we know if wellbeing has improved?

Lessons learnt on measuring wellbeing outcomes



How changes in wellbeing were measured

In order to measure the impact that projects were having on wellbeing, Spirit asked the organisations it funded to collect data against the ONS4 wellbeing indicators. Beyond this, projects have deployed different quantitative and qualitative methods to measure impact on wellbeing, including the following:

- **Quantitative measures to capture a broader understanding of wellbeing:** Projects such as *Coventry City of Culture*, *GOGA* and *EmpowHER* used baseline and endline surveys to measure change across different facets of wellbeing such as physical activity, engagement with social events, and being empowered to identify and lead social change. These measures were used in addition to the quantitative ONS4 wellbeing indicators for mental wellbeing and allowed projects to build more robust body of evidence on the impact of their projects.

“A key intention of [the programme] was to empower YW&G to be able to identify and lead social change. We measured this outcome across the programme as a whole, through looking at change in four key metrics (which participants were asked to grade themselves out of ten on) in pre/post surveys... We can confirm that there is a statistically significant positive difference for [programme] participants in the areas of confidence, resilience, responsibility and taking the lead, all of which should hopefully help them feel more empowered to identify and lead change.”

-- ‘Connected’ project report

- **Creative qualitative measures:** While most projects included some qualitative components in their evaluation, there was diversity in data capture approaches, from 1-1 structured interviews to group discussions, observations, qualitative feedback forms and video testimonies. For example, *Making Routes* (led by Battersea Arts Centre) used creative methodologies such as photography and film, drawing and symbol feedback (placing post-it notes next to symbols that best reflect their feelings) alongside interviews and surveys. These different kinds of qualitative methods allowed participants to detail their experiences in their own words.

“[Participants] have been given opportunities to go on TV, talk about the project, go on radio, will do social media things for each project and have different people talking about what they learn. So we try and make that a key thing, mainly for confidence building as well. But obviously, it's just great to get feedback of stuff and give other people opportunities to shine.”

-- ‘Connected’ project interview

Good practice in measuring wellbeing outcomes

Despite using diverse quantitative and qualitative methods, from the validated ONS4 indicators to the more informal group discussions and creative qualitative tools, measuring wellbeing remains challenging. For instance, certain questions may not be phrased in a way that is accessible to everyone, or some people may find them intrusive. Some good practices, however, emerged from Spirit-funded projects:

- Capturing **wellbeing outcomes across its different facets** (i.e. physical, social, emotional, and mental) allowed Spirit-funded organisations to build a more holistic picture of the wellbeing impact of their projects beyond a narrow focus.

- Using **creative methods co-produced with participants** helped ensure that participating in the data collection activity was fun and helped secure participant buy-in to the process.
- When people with learning disabilities, neurodivergence or dementia, children and young people, and participants who spoke English as an additional language had difficulties understanding the ONS wellbeing indicators, Spirit-funded organisations experimented with different ways to **adjust their approaches to the needs of participants** - such as translating forms, rewording questions, asking questions as part of games (e.g., participants running to different parts of the room to indicate their answers to multiple choice questions) and designing visuals. This allowed grantees to continue recording outcomes using this standardised tool by tailoring their methods of data collection to participant needs.

“We've used a lot of visuals. So a lot of smiley faces or sad faces or things like that to say that people don't feel they have to write a lot of information, because, with a lot of our participants, they need support filling out their evaluations, so we try and make it really simple.”

-- ‘Active’ project interview

- Evaluation questions around feelings of loneliness or mental health challenges were sometimes perceived (by staff and participants) as intrusive. Projects were able to overcome this by **building trust** between staff and participants, which helped both sides feel comfortable with these questions. Explaining why these questions were being asked was key and helped ensure buy-in to the process from all parties.

“Having [one particular staff member] in every session has helped enormously in participants feeling comfortable to fill in the ONS Wellbeing questions as he was able to explain that they were part of a family of Spirit funded projects across the country that were looking at how taking part in activities can have an impact on happiness.”

-- ‘Creative’ grantee report

Case study 3: Using different methods to measure impact

Based in Northern Ireland, the *Reading Rooms* project, led by Verbal Arts Centre, worked with young ex-offenders, many of whom had experienced mental health problems. The project aimed at empowering participants to improve their wellbeing by engaging with literature and to participate in facilitated discussions on carefully selected written pieces.

As well as the ONS4 wellbeing indicators, *Reading Rooms* used The [Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales](#) (WEMWBS) to explore impact on mental health in relation to anxiety. *Reading Rooms* also utilised a range of qualitative measures, such as focus groups, phone calls, one-to-one interviews, and digital case studies highlighting individual stories.

“In relation to getting a full understanding of where the participant is, and an insight into their world, it's been the video diaries that they have created... And because they have had that connection and trust [with us], they have been very confident to openly discuss where they were in their journey, and their thoughts and their feelings, and in

relation to their mental health and wellbeing... you only open up to that level of detail if you have that trust in place."

Staff were able to secure participant buy-in to these evaluation activities by being open and transparent about the reasons behind the evaluation from the start. It was explained to participants why questions on this topic were being asked, and ensured everyone understood the importance of conducting the evaluation. This time taken to secure buy-in from the beginning helped build trust between staff and participants.

"Being really transparent with a group at the beginning [is effective]... do you understand why we're doing this? Do you understand why we're asking you that question? Leaving it for them to be able to be informed and complete the paperwork in an informed way, rather than leaving blank spaces, because they have no idea what you're talking about, or leaving blank spaces, because you haven't set the boundaries at the beginning with them and created a space where they have bought into it."

One particular challenge related to measurement was due to the project's working environment. It was difficult for project staff to bring evaluation materials into prisons, meaning they had to negotiate with prison authorities to allow data collection activities. *Reading Rooms* were able to ensure the authorities understood the importance of conducting evaluation activities and the positive impact this could have by demonstrating the value of data from previous evaluation activities.

"So whenever we're able to give [the prison governor] the report at the end, that he can use in the language and framed in a way that's going to benefit him, then he joined the dots."

Reading Rooms' story shows how a mix of standardised quantitative tools as well as more experimental qualitative methods can provide a holistic understanding of wellbeing impacts on individual participants. Gaining buy-in from participants and external stakeholders by explaining the purpose and benefits of engaging with the evaluation can also help smooth the delivery and evaluation process.

Going forward

While wellbeing is personal to each individual, it is useful to consider the physical, social, and mental aspects of wellbeing when supporting a diverse range of participants. People – no matter their age, abilities, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, circumstances, or role (i.e., participants, volunteers, family/carers or staff) – all have physical, social, and mental wellbeing needs that should be considered and supported while delivering a project for the social good.

There is no single way to boost people's wellbeing, and activities and approaches ultimately will need to adapt to who they are, and what they want and need. Spirit-funded projects provide some examples that other social sector organisations could find inspiration from; such as promoting expression through creativity, developing and showcasing skills, offering sports and physical activities, creating a welcoming and non-judgemental environment, giving opportunities for people to socialise, and more.

As such, supporting wellbeing can be understood as an art, rather than a science; and this is also true when it comes to measuring wellbeing outcomes. Capturing evidence that someone's wellbeing improved (or declined) over time, does present challenges, due to the intangible and personal nature of wellbeing. Spirit-funded organisations, here again, have shown some examples of good practices to overcome those challenges, such as using creative data collection approaches tailored to research participants or building trust with them. Spirit itself has generated learning on this by gathering quantitative data across its portfolio, using ONS wellbeing indicators. That way, they could produce evidence that the projects they supported contributed to increasing the wellbeing of many individuals over time.

Overall, these findings call for three main recommendations:

- Social sector actors should always **consider how their projects can impact the multiple facets of wellbeing** when designing, delivering, or funding programmes. This will allow projects to be more precise when (1) identifying the impact they would like to achieve in different areas, and (2) determining how to measure this impact.
- Social sector actors should **also identify the mechanisms and approaches utilised to achieve change when designing projects**. While the specific activities on different projects can vary, the underlying mechanisms and approaches – such as learning skills or balancing consistency with flexibility – are common across projects in different sectors. Understanding these approaches and mechanisms can help ensure that projects have the key components needed to achieve wellbeing impact.
- Social sector actors should consider the challenges that could arise when attempting to measure wellbeing outcomes and **take time to design data collection methods that work with the people they support**. This does not mean abandoning standardised tools, but rather tailoring the approach used to collect this data, either qualitative or quantitative, to the needs of participants. While collecting wellbeing data may not be as straightforward as collecting other kinds of 'hard' data, it can be undertaken using carefully designed approaches.



Find out more at renaisi.com

Follow us on Twitter (@Renaissi) or on LinkedIn and get in touch at:

Contact details:

T +44 (0) 20 7033 2600

E info@renaisi.com

Unit 13 (entrance on Valette Street), 290-296 Mare Street, London, England, E8 1HE