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# building community wellbeing: a theory of change

A theory to explain how change can happen in communities to improve wellbeing, to inform the [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#) community evidence programme

# the aim

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing is an independent, government funded, organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, business and government, to enable them to use this evidence to make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing. The centre is currently supported by the ESRC and partners .

The Community evidence programme brings together evidence on what community-level factors determine wellbeing – focussing on:

- Place (the physical characteristics of where we live)
- People (the social relationships within a community)
- Power (participation in local decision-making)

Doing so, we aim to make wellbeing evidence usable to people working to improve it, from the frontbench to the frontline.





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# purpose

This Theory of Change describes ways in which community wellbeing can be built. It represents some of the possible pathways for improving community wellbeing and by doing so it simplifies some very complex issues and relationships.

It should help to understand how and why interventions might work, what will happen in the short term and how long term change in communities can occur.

This resource provides an accessible summary as an introduction to our Theory of Change. It will be used to inform how our researchers collect and interpret evidence during the three year project.

As the evidence programme develops we will refine the Theory of Change to represent our growing understanding of what works for community wellbeing.

The development of this Theory of Change was informed by some stakeholder engagement activities held across the UK between June and September 2015. This is summarised in a 'Voice of the Users' [report](#).



# Definitions: what's community?

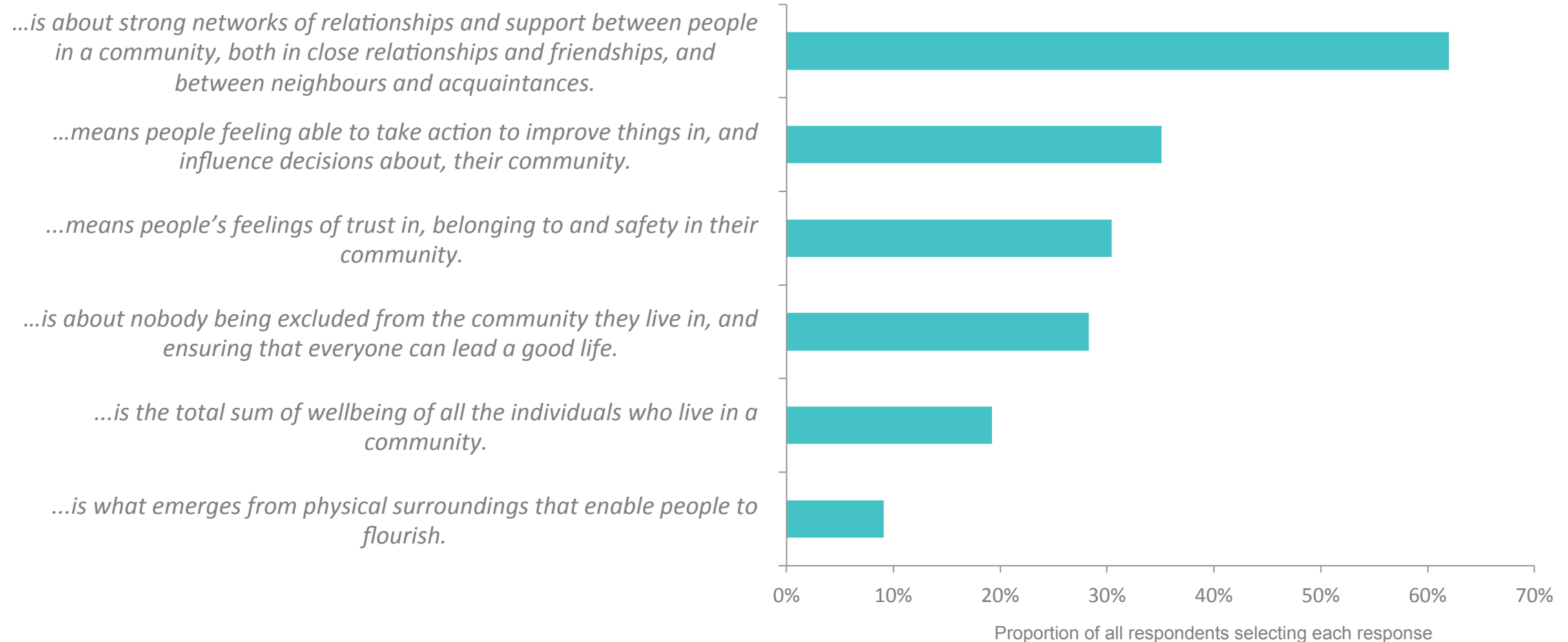
Different people define 'community' in different ways. There are communities of place and communities of interest. This Theory of Change is primarily designed around communities of place but can also be applied to communities of interest. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) define 'community' as follows:

*“A community is a group of people who have common characteristics or interests. Communities can be defined by: geographical location, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, a shared interest or affinity (such as religion and faith) or other common bonds, such as health need or disadvantage.”<sup>2</sup>*



# Definitions: what's community wellbeing?

Our online survey<sup>1</sup> asked: 'Which of the following statements comes closest to how you understand 'community wellbeing'? Community Wellbeing...





what are the processes that bring about  
change in community wellbeing?



# Building community wellbeing





# explaining the theory of change

- **1 - Community conditions.** The places where we live, how we relate to others and whether we have a say in how our local area and services run all influence our wellbeing. But while some people are part of communities that help them flourish, others are not well connected.
- **2 – Interventions.** There are things that government, organisations and individuals can all do to improve community wellbeing. These can range from national policy interventions to local implementation.
- **3 - Mechanisms of change.** Change to conditions at a community level can happen through improving living environments, strengthening social connections and making it easier for people to take part, amongst others.
- **4 – Intermediate outcomes.** Things then begin to change at a local level in neighbourhoods with improved community conditions. Sometimes there are also positive benefits for individuals at this stage, such as getting a job or going on a course.
- **5 - Long term wellbeing outcomes.** This helps us feel good and gives us the best chances to live, work and play well. Eventually this can lead to us living in communities that are more equal and respectful, where we feel safe and trust others and where everyone feels that they belong.
- **5 - Long term outcomes loops back to 1 - Community conditions.** Where the community wellbeing cycle works well, there are feedback loops and things keep improving as more people take part in community life and feel the benefits.
- **6 - Net savings.** This could also help government save money as people help each other and less services are needed. This is not always a necessary part of the community wellbeing change process, but can sometimes be a product of it.



# understanding the theory of change

Using a Theory of Change approach means trying to unpack the assumptions about how things link together. Later we will try to test out these assumptions and adjust the Theory of Change as needed.

- **Communities are diverse.** There is no 'one size fits all' for interventions and developing community wellbeing.
- **There are communities of place and communities of interest.** Communities of place join together people living in the same local area. Communities of interest connect people with things in common.
- **Community wellbeing and individual wellbeing are linked.** One can influence the other.
- **Community wellbeing concerns social relationships between people.** It is therefore more than the sum of the wellbeing of many individuals.
- **Interventions can influence communities,** but are often affected by what has happened in the community's past. No-one starts with a blank sheet of paper - the history and culture of a place matter.
- **Existing community conditions can affect our wellbeing** in both positive and negative ways.
- **Interventions by government and local organisations can help improve wellbeing,** but a really important factor is the active part people play.
- **Community wellbeing depends on *people, places and power*.** These vary across communities and for individual people. Interventions may need to overcome the effects of poverty and disadvantage in order to improve community wellbeing.
- **Change in communities develops in cycles,** but does not have to repeat what has happened in the past. The aim is to create a virtuous circle where community wellbeing grows and is sustainable.



# Next steps: what evidence do we need to understand what works to create this cycle?

Our initial engagement with people and this Theory of Change told us that when we look at evidence we need to try and answer the following questions:

- How can interventions **improve overall community wellbeing**, in addition to personal utility gain?
- How do interventions have different effects in different communities?
- How does change differ between communities of interest and communities of place?
- How do we **measure more of what matters**, such as changes in social relationships... more equal and respectful communities... safety, trust and belonging,... feeling good and functioning well?
- How do we measure and quantify value from these **'soft' outcomes**?
- What are the **catalysts for change** in communities?
- Will all this help government **save money**?



# Putting it into practice at the What Works centre for Wellbeing

Over the course of this project, we will systematically review the community wellbeing evidence for interventions related to:

- housing
- social relations
- co-production
- Five Ways to Wellbeing

We are also:

- reviewing current indicators used to measure 'community wellbeing'
- carrying out new analysis on wellbeing data from surveys in the UK
- co-producing a set of guidelines for how to assess wellbeing impact at project level

Added to these activities we will be hosting engagement events and hearing from experts from various perspectives to help understand how to put this evidence into practice.

As we find answers to the questions above we will change and update our Theory of Change.



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