



Colour to the Grey, Credit Jason Thompson

Introduction

Museums Northumberland bait has aimed to demonstrate the benefits to wellbeing of quality arts activity throughout all three phases of the programme. This forms a key element of the programme's 10-year Vision:

'To create a long term increase in levels of arts engagement, driven by the creativity and ambition of people living in South East Northumberland, having a demonstrable effect on the well-being of local people and levels of social energy and activism within communities and the means to sustain those changes in the future.'

A decision was made with partners including Northumberland County Council Public Health early in Phase 1 of the programme to use the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)¹ to assess changes in mental health and wellbeing as a result of taking part in Museums Northumberland bait projects.

This case study showcases Museums Northumberland bait's approach to assessing the impact of engaging in creative activities on wellbeing. It highlights good practice and learning and examines the strengths and weaknesses of using WEMWBS on a variety of projects.

¹ [The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale \(WEMWBS\)](#)

Context

Assessing the impact of engaging in the arts and creative activities on wellbeing has been a consistent feature of the Museums Northumberland bait programme since its inception in 2013. It was part of the original aims for the programme and featured in its underpinning Theory of Change with the linked ambition to “demonstrate the benefits to wellbeing of quality arts activity.”

More broadly it has also been explored by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGAHW) which aims to improve awareness of the benefits that the arts can bring to health and wellbeing. In 2017 the APPGAHW published an Inquiry Report² which draws together research and evidence on the contribution of arts to health and wellbeing.

Understanding wellbeing

One of the challenges associated with assessing the contribution of arts activity to wellbeing is the range of different definitions and interpretations of what is meant by wellbeing. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing³ has produced a useful overview of the different levels of wellbeing, including:

- **Individual wellbeing** - how we subjectively feel about our life, and objectively whether our human needs are being met
- **Community wellbeing** - includes individual wellbeing and impacts, but is more than just aggregating individual wellbeing in an area.

In Northumberland, the Health and Wellbeing Assessment (JSNA), which is the joint strategic needs assessment for the county, focuses specifically on wellbeing from the perspective of tackling health inequalities⁴. One of the themes in the current Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2018-2028⁵ is to empower people and communities and to provide access to networks and activities which support good health and resilience. The short version of WEMWBS is one of the methods referenced in the strategy to measure progress, along with qualitative interviews, focus groups, consultation events and case study analysis. This highlights the value in WEBWBS being used as one of the tools in a suite of approaches to evidence changes in health and wellbeing.

Wellbeing is influenced by a wide range of factors. For example, at a community level, perceptions of where people live are important as local pride and appreciation of an area are linked to feelings of attachment and a sense of belonging. Community connectedness is also important, which is driven by opportunities for people to meet up and socialise through meaningful interactions.

2 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017) - 'Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing'.

3 <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/>

4 <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Northumberland-Knowledge-and-JSNA/Our-Health-and-Wellbeing/Health-and-Wellbeing-1.aspx>

5 <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Health-and-social-care/Public%20Health/Northumberland-CC-Health-and-Wellbeing-17-12-19-2.pdf>

At an individual level, research points to the value of regular participation or attendance at events in driving self-reported improvements in wellbeing. Social capital, which may be understood as a measure of neighbourhood trust and civic engagement, is also an important driver of wellbeing. Conversely the prevalence of social isolation and loneliness can negatively influence an individual's sense of wellbeing⁶.

Understanding which aspect of wellbeing an intervention, or programme, is aiming to contribute towards is important as this can inform the selection of an appropriate tool or measurement process. In the context of the Museums Northumberland bait programme, the agreed focus in 2012 was on measuring wellbeing at a community level and in particular mental wellbeing in adults.

Why WEMWBS?

WEMWBS has been validated for use in a range of geographical locations, cultural contexts and settings. It is focused on positive aspects of mental health and is commonly used to track progression and impact over time, (e.g. to support public health initiatives or clinical studies).

WEMWBS data has been used by Museums Northumberland bait to generate a whole-population analysis, (i.e. assessing changes across a group of specific participants or programme-wide participants, rather than tracking individual impacts over time).

Its use as a consistent tool by Museums Northumberland bait programme was innovative. Its introduction in 2013 predates subsequent guidance by Public Health England on appropriate ways of documenting the impacts of arts for health and wellbeing⁷ and has generated considerable learning for partners and the sector more widely.

Based on guidance from Consortium partner Northumberland County Council Public Health, WEMWBS was chosen by Museums Northumberland bait as the preferred approach to evidencing the 'demonstrable effect on the wellbeing of local people' that forms a key part of the programme's 10-year vision. WEMWBS was chosen due to it:

- Providing a credible, user-friendly methodology
- Using a range of questions composed of 'non-medical' language
- Offering a straightforward approach to analysing the results
- Providing a means to assess changes in population wellbeing
- Facilitating the analysis of a combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence

WEMWBS comprises two scales - a 7-item and the 14-item scale⁸ used by Museums Northumberland bait. People are invited to complete scored questionnaires at the start of a project and at the end, with at least a two-week gap between the first and second

6 For an overview of key literature see Wavehill (2021) - 'The Contribution of Events to Scotland's Wellbeing'. Report for Visit Scotland.

7 Public Health England (2016)- 'Arts for health and wellbeing: An evaluation framework'.

8 [WEMWBS: 14-item vs 7-item scale \(warwick.ac.uk\)](http://www.warwick.ac.uk)

scores. The statements on the questionnaire ask about the feelings and thoughts of participants based on their experience over the last two weeks.

Statements	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling interested in other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've had energy to spare	1	2	3	4	5
I've been dealing with problems well	1	2	3	4	5
I've been thinking clearly	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling close to other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling confident	1	2	3	4	5
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling loved	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling interested in new things	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling cheerful	1	2	3	4	5

The WEMWBS score is the sum of the ratings of the 14 statements which are scored from 1 to 5. Scores therefore range from 14 to 70 with higher scores indicating greater positive mental wellbeing.

Target participants

Participating in research to assess changes in wellbeing through WEMWBS has always been entirely optional for Museums Northumberland bait participants. The qualitative impact of people engaging in creative activities has also been captured as part of internal and independent evaluation of projects and commissions. However, the use of the WEMWBS methodology has been more selective and linked to project aims, needs of participants and nature of project activities.

It is also important to highlight the complementarity and relationship between different approaches to measuring health and wellbeing. For example, WEMWBS has strong links to the Five Ways to Wellbeing⁹, with many aspects of Museums Northumberland bait projects linking with multiple elements of these steps to improve mental health and wellbeing:

1. Connect
2. Be active
3. Take notice
4. Keep learning
5. Give

It is important to state that a quantitative assessment of wellbeing attributed to creative activities will not always be appropriate. However, improvements in wellbeing attributed to Museums Northumberland bait projects and commissions typically linked to increased pride, enhanced self-confidence and reduced isolation can still be recorded and evaluated through a range of approaches.

For example, ***Nowt About us Without Us***, an exhibition highlighting the journeys of people working with artists gathered simple feedback using a visual tool to track qualitatively what would be a maximum of a two-hour interaction. More widely, the Community Programming project which supported local people to identify and programme theatre shows in community venues used feedback from interviews with participants and partners to capture the collective and individual journeys of those involved.

The relevance and strength of analysis of the impact of creative activities required a robust and trusted methodology that could be applied consistently over a range of projects. Museums Northumberland bait has utilised WEMWBS to not only assess the impact of the programme, but also build on and help to fill the gaps in the existing evidence base.

Projects and partners

Approximately 70 Museums Northumberland bait projects and commissions have utilised WEMWBS, with 522 people¹⁰ completing the wellbeing assessment. These projects and commissions have been increasingly longer-term in nature in Phases 2 and 3 of the programme compared to the typically shorter term projects generating 'short, sharp impacts' prevalent in Phase 1 of the programme. Both have equal applicability for WEMWBS.

Examples of projects highlighted by the programme team to reveal the breadth of application of WEMWBS across different client groups include:

⁹ [Five ways to wellbeing - Mind](#)

¹⁰ The vast majority of these are different people, taking part in different projects

The **Open Door** project involved people with refugee status who have recently resettled in South East Northumberland. The project combined fortnightly sessions with artists with an open, safe and supportive environment embracing fun, socialising and food to facilitate interaction for those new to the country. Some of the people who took part have progressed to play key roles in project development in Phase 3 of the programme.

Northumberland Recovery Partnership (NRP) is a dedicated service for anyone in Northumberland, 18 years old or over, who is experiencing problems with drugs and alcohol. NRP worked with Museums Northumberland bait during Phase 1 of the programme to deliver a 12-week series of arts workshops to explore and create arts a tool for wellbeing and recovery.

“The arts and WEMWBS enable a voice and inner feelings to be expressed – it’s also a great way to evaluate service provision.”
(Sam Ruth, NRP team leader)

Escape Family Support¹¹ is a county-wide drug and alcohol misuse charity. It worked with Museums Northumberland bait in 2014 to enable service users to experience a range of arts activities delivered by freelance artists. The success of these pilot art taster sessions encouraged Escape to establish a longer-term artist residency which delivered fortnightly sessions over a six month period.¹²

“WEMWBS was introduced to ESCAPE Family Support by bait as a tool that can be used to gather robust and reliable data to measure people’s wellbeing. Since using WEMWBS for our art sessions working with bait, we’ve recently piloted it for a Strengthening Families Course with parents and carers and the results were quite astounding – over 30% increase in people’s well-being from the start of the programme to the end. We really like the ease of use and the simple, relaxed format of the questions for participants to complete and we’re planning to use it more.”
(Nikki Barron, Escape Family Support Team Manager)

The Bridge Project worked with Museums Northumberland bait in 2018/19 to offer arts workshops as part of a programme to remove barriers to work for people living in South East Northumberland. The impact of the 18-month collaboration was such that Bridge beneficiaries had developed sufficient skills and confidence to facilitate a workshop for approximately 30 people including Public Health officials and staff from Museums Northumberland to highlight their experience on the project.

Outcomes and impact – what changed as a result?

Whilst many people recognise the fundamental benefits of creative activity to wellbeing, by building relationships with partners, Museums Northumberland bait has been able to create an evidence base to analyse this impact in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

¹¹ [Escape Family Support - Opening doors to drug and alcohol support](#)

¹² Further details on the programme’s partnership with ESCAPE Family Support can be found in the following case study: [bait-CS-EscapeFamilySupport.pdf \(baittime.to\)](#)

Analysis of the data gathered across the three phases of the Museums Northumberland bait programme reveals:

- In each year of delivery of the programme, between 72-75% of participants reported improvements in wellbeing via WEMWBS. A drop to 69% in analysis completed in January 2022 is judged to be related to the impact of COVID-19 and the increase in social isolation¹³.
- A 15% overall increase in wellbeing scores as a result of participants engaging in a range of creative activities.

The positive impact of the programme on wellbeing is highlighted in the changes in the proportion of participants' scores in the top and bottom 15% ranges.

	WEMWBS Score	Proportion of bait participants - 1st score	Proportion of bait participants - 2nd score
Top 15%	60-70	13%	25%
Middle	43-59	52%	59%
Bottom 15%	14-42	35%	16%

- The proportion of Museums Northumberland bait participants with scores equivalent to bottom 15% of the sample decreased from 35% to 16%.
- The proportion of Museums Northumberland bait participants with scores equivalent to top 15% of the sample increased from 13% to 25%.

Importantly in terms of the legacy of the programme and its investment in WEMWBS, a number of partners now recognise the value of engaging their clients, members and local community in creative activities. There is also greater recognition of the merits of measuring the impact to assess progress towards a range of socio-economic targets. As a result, many partners have adopted creative activities to help them meet their own aims and service objectives. Crucially, this impact has been used to not only shape ongoing delivery, but also to inform funding bids and organisational capacity building based on a combination of WEMWBS data and qualitative feedback from staff and participants.

- Northumberland Recovery Partnership used data gathered in partnership with Museums Northumberland bait to inform a successful bid for £20,000 from the Rayne Foundation. This enabled the continued use of creative activities to achieve a range of arts and non-arts impacts and outcomes.
- Museums Northumberland has also recently incorporated WEMWBS analysis into elements of its wider delivery after its Collections Team received training from the Museums Northumberland bait Arts for Wellbeing Manager.

¹³ It should be noted that some individuals required some guidance in order to complete the assessment.

Qualitatively, the improvements inferred by WEMWBS data have typically reflected increased levels of self-confidence, greater engagement and an increased propensity to take risks in participating in creative activities. For example, this could be someone trying something new, engaging in something they feel not so good at, or sharing creative work publicly with audiences for the first time.

The wealth of evidence and expertise developed by Museums Northumberland bait through the programme has also led to the team presenting at events and conferences. They have also been asked to add value to wider partnerships keen to emulate the successes achieved in South East Northumberland. This is increasingly relevant given the role that arts and creative activities have played in the recovery work linked to COVID-19¹⁴.

Lessons learnt

Key areas of learning which can inform ongoing and similar activities include:

- WEMWBS can provide evidence of the wellbeing impacts of creative activities, with more robust evidence typically found from sustained periods of engagement. This complements evidence outlined in the report on arts, health and wellbeing produced for the All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry¹⁵ which suggests that participants need to complete around 100 hours per year (average of 2 hours per week) to impact on their wellbeing, highlighting the importance of regular engagement.
- The benefits of providing a focal point and driving force such as the Museums Northumberland bait Arts for Wellbeing Manager to generate buy-in and consistency of approach amongst partners, artists, consortium members and staff are clear. This specialism has also been important in overcoming some people's, (i.e. participants', artists' and partners') inhibitions or lack of confidence in an approach which asks about sensitive and subjective issues.
- WEMWBS data helps to form a picture of what the wellbeing impact of engaging in creative activities can look like. Qualitative evidence can complement and enhance the quality of any analysis and evaluation of process and impact.
- It is necessary to build trust, confidence and cohesiveness in a group before introducing WEMWBS and wellbeing analysis into the project process. As a result, and specifically as WEMWBS asks about how people were feeling 'yesterday' and 'today', this potentially misses weeks or months of 'impact' that is underreported in the final analysis.
- WEMWBS can provide difficulties for people with literacy issues, learning difficulties or for people for whom English is not their first language given the language used, potential differences in interpretation between cultures and the format of the assessment¹⁶.
- Feedback highlights concerns among some artists about measuring the wellbeing impacts of their work, alongside the practicalities of including WEMWBS data collection into their engagement with participants. As a result, some artists have

¹⁴ See <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Health-and-social-care/Public%20Health/Northumberland-CC-Health-and-Wellbeing-17-12-19-2.pdf>

¹⁵ [Creative Health Inquiry Report 2017 - Second Edition.pdf](#) (culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk) p.36

¹⁶ WEMWBS has been translated into over 30 languages

been unwilling or unable to administer the approach, requiring the Museums Northumberland bait team to take the lead.

- COVID-19 has impacted negatively on the programme’s ability to administer the WEMWBS assessment with social distancing reducing the face to face contact needed to support people to complete the approach effectively given the personal nature of questions.
- The value derived from the WEMWBS data can be increased with additional resources and expertise to add depth to the analysis process. For example, extra data analysis capacity from Northumberland County Council Public Health during Phase 1 of the programme enabled more comparisons with national trends and additional analysis of patterns of wellbeing amongst cohorts. Greater resources could also inform more detailed analysis by participant demographic data for example.
- The use of WEMWBS by Museums Northumberland bait to evidence the wellbeing impact of engaging in creative activities was innovative at the beginning of the programme. However, it is just one of a number of measures and approaches now available to organisations. For example, the ‘ONS4’ subjective wellbeing questions on life satisfaction, sense of worth of activities, happiness and anxiety provide an alternative option to WEMWBS that contribute to Official Statistics and facilitate easier comparisons with wider datasets.

Summary

The decision to use WEMWBS to demonstrate the benefits to wellbeing of quality arts activity has, with the support of partners and the drive of the Museums Northumberland Arts for Wellbeing Manager, developed an evidence base from which an informed assessment of the link between creative activities and wellbeing can be made. In addition to a suite of positive qualitative feedback, the programme can evidence that between 72-75% of participants completing the assessment each year reported an increase in wellbeing with a 15% overall increase in wellbeing observed across the whole sample of participants.



Close Knit animation workshop. Credit Jason Thompson

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