

Happiness index to gauge Britain's national mood



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The UK government is poised to start measuring people's psychological and environmental wellbeing, bidding to be among the first countries to officially monitor happiness.

Despite "nervousness" in Downing Street at the prospect of testing the national mood amid deep cuts and last week's riot in Westminster, the Office of National Statistics will shortly be asked to produce measures to implement David Cameron's long-stated ambition of gauging "general wellbeing".

Countries such as France and Canada are looking at similar initiatives as governments around the world come under pressure to put less store on conventional economic measures of prosperity such as gross domestic product.

British officials say there is still hesitation in some parts of Whitehall over going ahead with the program during such difficult economic times, but Cameron is said to want to place the eventual results at the heart of future government policy-making.

On 25 November, the government will ask the independent national statistician Jil Matheson to devise questions to add to the existing household survey by as early as next spring.

It will be up to Matheson to choose the questions but the government's aim is for respondents to be regularly polled on their subjective wellbeing, which includes a gauge of happiness, and also a more objective sense of how well they are achieving their "life goals".

The new data will be placed alongside existing measures to create a bundle of indications about our quality of life.

A government source said the results could be published quarterly in the same way as the British crime survey, but the exact intervals are yet to be agreed.

The source said: "The aim is to produce a fresh set of data, some of it new, some of using existing data sets currently not very well used, to be published – at a frequency to be decided – that assesses the psychological and physical wellbeing of people around the UK. So that's objective measurements of, for instance, how much recycling gets done around the UK, alongside more subjective measures of [psychology](#) and attitudes."

There are currently different views within the government on whether all indicators should be shrunk into one single wellbeing indicator or simple happiness index.

The government already polls people on their life satisfaction but experts say the innovation is that the new tests will ask more subjective questions and will be put to a larger sample size. The combined wellbeing data set, it says, will have a more central role in policy-making.

A Downing Street source said: "If you want to know, should I live in Exeter rather than London? What will it do to my quality of life? You need a large enough sample size and if you have a big sample, and have more than one a year, then people can make proper analysis on what to do with their life. And next time we have a comprehensive spending review, let's not just guess what effect various policies will have on people's wellbeing. Let's actually know."

The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, announced last year he intended to include happiness and wellbeing in France's measurement of economic progress. Sarkozy was responding to recommendations made by two Nobel economists, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, who called on world leaders to move away from a purely economic concept of gross domestic product, which measures economic production, to wellbeing and sustainability. That report suggested a shift from production to greater attention to household wealth and an assessment of whether countries were growing sustainably or damaging the environment.

Canadian statisticians also poll subjective wellbeing across the country but it is not part of their official data set.

John Helliwell, a member of Canada's National Statistics Council who has been in talks with the UK on how to measure subjective wellbeing, told the Guardian: "The UK plans are putting into action the two most important elements of the Stiglitz/Sen report: systematically measuring subjective wellbeing as part of a broader national accounting system, and using these data to inform policy choices."

Over the last two months Downing Street has called on experts, including Sen, to advise it on the policy and keep one eye on Sarkozy's progress. "We've certainly drawn on Sarkozy, we have learnt from them and hope to go a bit further," a source said.

"There has been skepticism but David Cameron was very clear in opposition this would be what he would do and even in tough times it's just as relevant an agenda. The purpose of GDP is ultimately to help people lead more satisfactory lives and it is as important during a downturn as during a boom."

In 2006, just five months into his time as Conservative party leader, Cameron described the task of gauging people's wellbeing as one of the "central political issues of our time".

Helliwell said: "Canadian statisticians and researchers also poll subjective wellbeing across the country, but the data have thus far not attracted much policy attention.

"What is or could be dramatically different in the UK is for the government not just to undertake more widespread and thorough collection of subjective wellbeing data, but also to give them a central place in the choice and evaluation of public policies. That would be a global first."