



What works to improve wellbeing across different interventions

Looking at ONS personal wellbeing findings in impact evaluations



THE QUICK READ: WHAT THIS IS, HOW IT HELPS, AND GET INVOLVED

This briefing is based on a rapid evidence assessment of impact evaluations that use the personal wellbeing measures from the Office for National Statistics. These are known as the ONS4. They measure life satisfaction, happiness, our sense of feeling worthwhile (purpose), and anxiety.

This is the first time an evidence review has been carried out for the ONS4. This review looked solely at studies of adults the UK. It is part of our work to systematically identify and summarise evidence from evaluations that use wellbeing frameworks and standardised measures.

The ONS4 measures are being used across a wide range of intervention types to evaluate effectiveness.

These include housing improvement and neighbourhood design; community-centred approaches; and skills training.

We are always looking for evaluations of wellbeing projects, programmes, and policies carried out by government, academics, funders, civil society, or businesses. This helps to build the broader evidence base on what works. You can send your wellbeing evaluations to evaluation@whatworkswellbeing.org



WE SIFTED THROUGH
7,056 STUDIES

28 HAVE BEEN INCLUDED

*11 STUDIES SHOWED A STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT CHANGE FOR AT LEAST ONE of the ONS4.

KEY FINDINGS

What effect did different services, projects, and programmes have on personal wellbeing?

ONS4 evaluations: what works?

Key



Increase



Decrease



Decrease in anxiety

Type of intervention	What happened?	Who was involved?	Before and after change in average ONS4 scores ¹	Evidence strength ²
SOCIAL PRESCRIBING (2019)	Social prescribing pilot service with three link workers that aimed to help people access local services and activities to support their health and wellbeing.	Data from 52 participants referred by GPs, practice nurses, community nursing teams, care navigation staff, social workers, ambulance staff and A&E staff. 193 participants in total.	LIFE SAT. PURPOSE HAPPINESS ANXIETY ONS4 (all) ³	MOD.
SOCIAL PRESCRIBING (2014)	Holistic social prescribing wellbeing programme offering 12 weeks of one-to-one support, followed by 12 months of group support around a particular activity.	Data from 48 participants who live in a deprived city ward and have been referred by GPs following identification of low level mental health issues. 128 participants in total.	LIFE SAT. PURPOSE HAPPINESS ANXIETY	MOD.
HOUSING/ NEIGHBOURHOOD: (2017)	Government-led free programme to improve the energy performance of hard-to-heat, hard-to-treat homes in low-income areas through measures (eg. external wall insulation, central heating system).	Data from 782 participants. Participating households are from communities selected by policymakers to be eligible for the programme on the basis of proxies of fuel poverty (eg. area deprivation and proportion of hard-to-heat homes). 1508 participants in total.	ONS4 (all)	HIGH
PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS (2016)	A brief psychological intervention based on self-affirmation theory that includes a self-affirmation exercise.	Data from 44 women participants aged over 45 years old. Recruited door-to-door or via social groups (e.g. choirs). Locations were chosen on the basis of them being in the middle quintile according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation datasets. 140 participants in total.	ONS4 (all)	HIGH

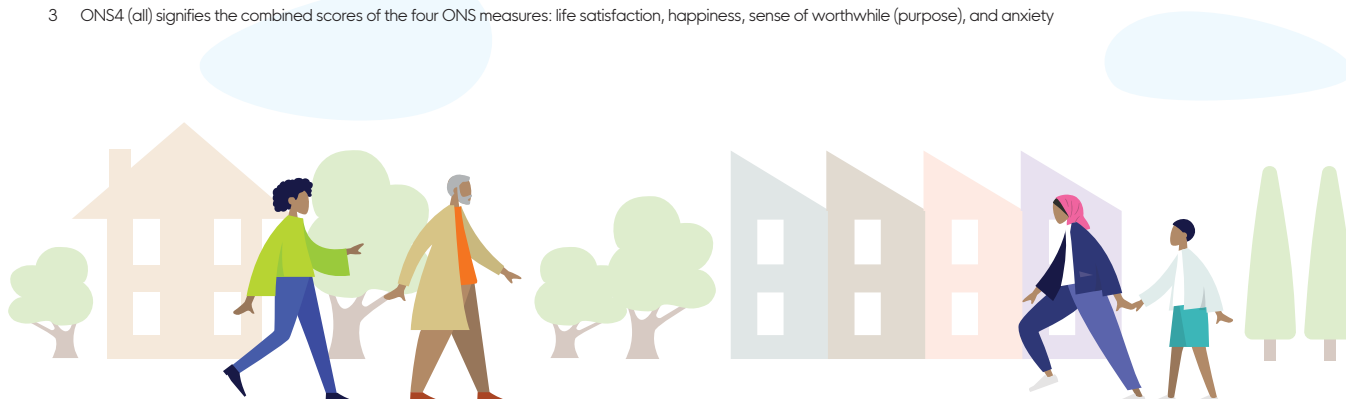
1 Changes in mean score (out of 10 for single measures and out of 40 for combined ONS4) from baselines to follow-up and effect size (cohen's d where available)

2 These ratings provide an indication of overall level of confidence in the design, conduct and reporting of the study.

The 10 elements of the checklist were scored either **1** (yes) or **0** (no, can't tell or N/A). The total score was used to assign each study an overall level of confidence of **LOW** (0-2), **MODERATE** (3-6) or **HIGH** (7-10).

Scoring system is based on the EIF quality checklist for quantitative evidence of intervention effectiveness, adapted by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2019).

3 ONS4 (all) signifies the combined scores of the four ONS measures: life satisfaction, happiness, sense of worthwhile (purpose), and anxiety



ONS4 evaluations: what works? (continued)

Type of intervention	What happened?	Who was involved?	Before and after change in average ONS4 scores ¹	Evidence strength
COMMUNITY – PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES (2016)	Fund that aims to support communities (adults and children) to create healthier lifestyles and improve their wellbeing through: physical activity, healthy eating and improved mental wellbeing.	Data from 166 participants who took part in projects across the Fund's portfolios. Circ. 810,000 adults in total.	LIFE SAT.  PURPOSE 	MODERATE
VOLUNTEERING Older residents (2018)	Project that enables older people in a residential home to volunteer. Roles included: setting the table, gardening, leading social groups, organising social trips, visiting people or helping out at local churches or schools.	Data from 40 participants aged over 75 who live in a residential home and took part in the volunteering projects. 97 participants in total.	PURPOSE 	MODERATE
COMMUNITY Physical activity (2019)	Community-wide programme that aims to improve the health and wellbeing of whole towns and cities by getting people of all ages physically active.	Data from 1314 participants who took part in one of the physical activity programmes. 29,752 participants in total.	ANXIETY 	LOW
ADVICE & SUPPORT: Financial wellbeing support for civil servants (2019)	Charity providing help and support to serving, former and retired civil servants. A team of case workers delivered financial support, wellbeing support and caring help.	Data from 660 participants receiving help from a charity supporting civil servants. Three quarters of participants were either carers or, had a long-term health condition, or a household income of less than £20,000. 838 applicants in total.	LIFE SAT.  PURPOSE  HAPPINESS 	MODERATE
SKILLS TRAINING Support for military families (2019)	Early intervention services for military-connected families, including parenting skills, parents' resilience and social connections.	Data from 15 participants who were parents and carers using early help drop-in services at military sites. 114 participant total.	ANXIETY 	LOW
SOCIAL PRESCRIBING (2019)	Social prescribing service providing telephone and up to 6 face-to-face coaching sessions to connect participants to non-clinical community-based activities.	Data from 40 participants living with and beyond cancer in four inner city boroughs referred to service by outreach, primary or secondary care professional, community partners, or self-referral. 101 people in total.	ANXIETY 	MODERATE
VOLUNTEERING Sports (2020)	Volunteering fund that aims to increase the diversity of people volunteering in sport by funding volunteering activities such as coaching, refereeing, supporting volunteers, organising an activity or event and fundraising.	Data from 1094 participants Almost half lived in areas of high deprivation, one third were from BAME communities and one quarter were disabled. 2132 volunteers in total.	LIFE SAT.  PURPOSE  HAPPINESS 	LOW

Can you be confident in this evidence?

Our **REA summary report** presents findings on the characteristics, results and quality of 28 included studies and we've built an accompanying **study database** with in-depth information on the evaluation design, sample, findings and quality score of each impact evaluation. REAs use the same rigour as systematic reviews to identify and select studies, albeit with narrower research questions and less extensive review methods.⁴

⁴ CEBMa (2017). Guideline for Rapid Evidence Assessments in Management and Organizations Amsterdam: Center for Evidence Based Management.

WHO IS USING THE ONS4 MEASURES IN IMPACT EVALUATIONS, AND WHY?

The ONS4 measures are increasingly used across government departments, as well as the private sector and third sector organisations. Yet, until this review, relatively little was known about how they feature and perform in wellbeing impact evaluations in the UK. We can now highlight some relevant findings:

1. Organisations are now using the ONS4 measures to evaluate the effectiveness of a wide range of intervention types.

These include: community-centred approaches, volunteering, physical activity, social prescribing, psychological interventions, social care support, skills training, advice and support, arts and culture, and housing improvement and neighbourhood design.

2. Many of the interventions are aimed at one or more specific demographic groups, and are delivered across UK regions.

Populations included: older people (11 studies), working age adults (4 studies), women (1 study), Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (2 studies), people living in deprived areas (6 studies) and people with underlying health conditions (6 studies). Interventions spanned 8 official UK regions, excluding Northern Ireland and the East Midlands.

3. More organisations are using the ONS4 to evaluate wellbeing interventions.

The first eligible study found was published in 2014 and more than half the studies identified were published between 2018 and 2020.

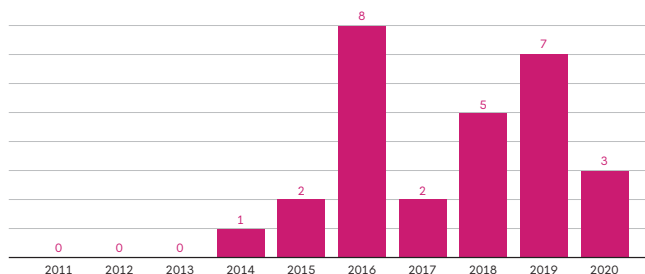


Fig. 1 Studies included by year of publication.

4. The measures feature in evaluations produced by a range of universities and consultancies, and they are used in a variety of research designs.

The most commonly mentioned funder of evaluations was the Big Lottery and the large majority of studies are classed as grey literature (22 studies).

5. The most commonly used ONS4 questions were LIFE SATISFACTION and HAPPINESS and almost half the studies used additional non-ONS4 wellbeing measures.

Of the 16 studies that used all four ONS questions to assess effectiveness, only two calculated or provided combined scores for the ONS4. The most common additional wellbeing measures were:

- » Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale (WEMWBS) (8 studies)
- » Loneliness (9 studies)
- » Quality of Life scales (4)
- » ONS Social capital measures (4).

6. The majority of studies (19) collected qualitative data on wellbeing through interviews or focus groups with participants.

While use of the ONS4 seems more common in uncontrolled studies with moderate to low quality scores, there is promising evidence for some intervention types, in particular social prescribing which may warrant its own, more targeted review.

Share your wellbeing evaluation by clicking here:

evaluation@whatworkswellbeing

[Download the full technical report](#)



ONS4 EVALUATIONS

WHAT WORKS BRIEFING

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