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# There's more to life than money, and NZ Treasury has the charts to prove it

By Stephen Easton (</author/seaston/>) · 15/01/2019



**The New Zealand Treasury continues to refine its four-dimensional foray into the measurement of national wellbeing with a new online Living Standards Framework Dashboard.**

The department, also known as Kaitohutohu Kaupapa Rawa, began developing its Living Standards Framework (<https://treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/living-standards/our-living-standards-framework>) in 2011 based on decades of data from NZ and other nations via the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It is seen as a way to improve advice to government on the basis that a strong economy is only one aspect of living standards.

The LSF recognises four aspects of the nation's general health described broadly as social, natural and human capital, as well as the traditional kind that refers to the value of financial and physical assets. It draws on a wide range of sources, including stacks of information that came out of a royal commission on social policy back in 1988.

The LSF Dashboard (<https://treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/living-standards/our-living-standards-framework/measuring-wellbeing-lsf-dashboard>), a relatively new addition to the project, was first proposed halfway through

last year, then rapidly developed by Treasury and Stats NZ in only a few months to make its debut in early December.

*"It is not prescriptive about whether or how governments should intervene to promote wellbeing, it helps support advice about prioritisation."*

"A lot of intensive work has gone into creating this first version of the Living Standards Framework Dashboard and it's satisfying to share what we have achieved in a short time," chief economic adviser Tim Ng said in a statement at the time.

The actual content was informed by a public discussion and consultation process that centred around a draft set of wellbeing indicators proposed by former OECD economist Conal Smith, an academic at Victoria University of Wellington.

The department reports it got about 500 survey responses and 60 formal submissions, and held "many discussions with interested groups from within and outside the public sector" in the process of developing its first iteration of the LSF Dashboard.

It also brought together "independent experts from the research and practitioner communities" to form a "Challenge Group" – critics whose job was to test out the dashboard at various points along the way and provide their unvarnished views.

Essentially, the newest offshoot of the LSF slices the available information in three ways that provides a genuinely multi-faceted picture of life in the land of the long white cloud.

One section labelled "Our people" is about differences within society, showing various measures of wellbeing among groups defined by their sex, age, ethnicity, employment status, family characteristics, region, and neighbourhood.

The second is called "Our country" and compares how well NZ is doing in a large range of areas with other OECD member states.

Finally, the "Our future" section allows one to track specific examples of the four kinds of capital that are seen as important in maintaining and improving on current living standards.

Under social capital, for example, one is presented with a series of charts showing the available data on everything from the prevalence of discrimination and perceptions of corruption to "sense of belonging" and how much New Zealanders trust each other and their government institutions.

The human capital graphs cover things like cognitive skills at age 15, educational attainment and life expectancy.

## 'Not a scorecard on government performance'

Ng said the dashboard was as a practical tool primarily to support the department's work that was made public in the interests of transparency and because others would also find it useful, but he emphasised that "a scorecard on the performance of current or previous governments" was not the goal here.

“It is also our aim to make the information accessible, interactive and visually engaging for interested members of the public, as well as for researchers and other specialists,” he said. “Public consultation helped shape the LSF Dashboard and we want it to be something that a broad range of people can engage with.

A Treasury paper explains it was designed so the government of the day could use however it wished: “It is not prescriptive about whether or how governments should intervene to promote wellbeing, it helps support advice about prioritisation.”

Perhaps inevitably, the project ran into limitations related to the kinds of data that is available:

“The Treasury’s selection of preferred indicators for the initial version of the LSF Dashboard was further influenced by the availability and consistency of data, and its ability to be regularly updated.

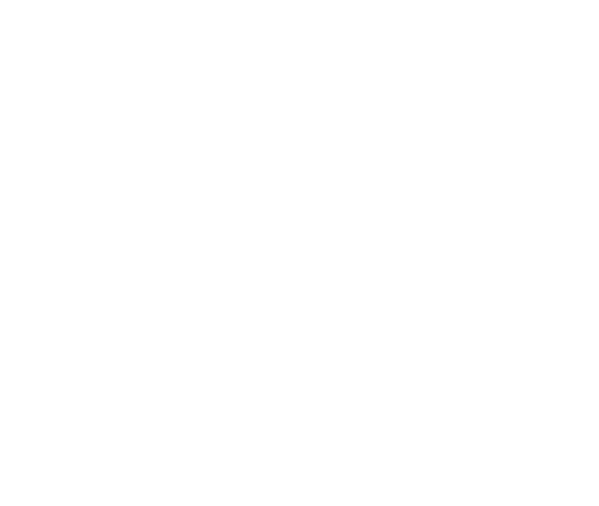
“This has been a particular challenge when trying to identify indicators to reflect culture and some aspects of natural capital.”

The department is open about the limitations of the project, noting it can’t reflect “absolutely everything that matters” to everyone who calls Aotearoa home, although it already has some priorities for the next version of the dashboard, due in 2021.

“Among the issues we’re still addressing is how to better embed te ao Māori perspectives of wellbeing in the LSF Dashboard,” Ng said. “There are also limitations in how Pacific peoples’ perspectives, cultural identity, and risk and resilience are currently incorporated.

“The wellbeing of children and young people are not directly represented in this first version of the LSF Dashboard. This is in large part due to children and young people not being well represented in survey-based data collections on which the Dashboard draws heavily. In addition, disability is not currently one of the distributions that the LSF Dashboard can provide.

“So the LSF Dashboard will keep developing over time. We will continue to update and refine the indicators, based on the most relevant and robust data available, and reflect them in our broader economic, financial, and policy advice to governments.”





**Stephen Easton (/author/seaston) **  
**([https://twitter.com/Stevie\\_Easton](https://twitter.com/Stevie_Easton))**

Stephen Easton is a journalist at *The Mandarin* based in Canberra. He's previously reported for *Canberra CityNews* and worked on industry titles for The Intermedia Group.

(/author/seaston)

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