Personal Well-being in the UK, 2012/13

Coverage: International  
Date: 30 July 2013  
Geographical Area: UK  
Theme: People and Places

Key Points

• According to the latest findings from the ONS Annual Population Survey, there were small improvements in personal well-being in the UK between 2011/12 and 2012/13.

• The percentage of people reporting higher levels of life satisfaction, feeling that the things they do in life are worthwhile and happiness levels all increased while the percentage reporting higher levels of anxiety declined.

• Between 2011/12 and 2012/13 the proportion of people rating their life satisfaction as 7 or more out of 10 rose from 75.9% to 77.0%. There was also a reduction in the proportion of people rating their anxiety at a higher level of 6 or more out of 10 falling from 21.8% to 20.9%.

• The data show differences in personal well-being between groups of the population. For example, people aged 45 to 49 rated their life satisfaction lower than any other age group and Black people lower than any other ethnic group. There were no significant changes between the years for unemployed people whose average life satisfaction remained below those in employment.

• Other non-official sources show an improvement in personal well-being for similar periods. They also show that life satisfaction in the UK changed less between 2007 and 2011 than other European countries.

Background

This bulletin presents annual findings for personal well-being in the UK for April 2012 to March 2013. It compares the latest results to those of the previous year, published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in July 2012.

Personal well-being, people’s thoughts and feelings about their own quality of life, is an important aspect of national well-being and is used by ONS to supplement other economic, social and environmental statistics to provide a statistical picture of the nation’s well-being.
The estimates in this bulletin are based on data from the Annual Population Survey (APS) which includes responses from around 165,000 people. This provides a large representative sample of adults aged 16 and over who live in residential households in the UK.

Since April 2011, the APS has included four questions which are used to monitor personal well-being in the UK:

1. Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
2. Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
3. Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
4. Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

People are asked to give their answers on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'. These questions allow people to make an assessment of their life overall, as well as providing an indication of their day-to-day emotions. Although 'yesterday' may not be a typical day for any one individual, the large sample means that these differences 'average out' and provide a reliable assessment of the anxiety and happiness of the adult population in the UK over the year.

This bulletin also explores differences in personal well-being estimates by sex, age, ethnicity, relationship status, health, disability, and employment status. Breaking down overall findings in this way is useful for looking at how well-being differs across society and can help to show how policies can be developed to improve people's well-being.

The large sample of the APS also allows estimates for regional and local geographies to be produced, but this bulletin focuses on the UK as a whole. A separate bulletin will be published by ONS in October 2013 which will present personal well-being across the UK, including estimates for Local Authority Districts.

ONS personal well-being estimates are 'Experimental Statistics' and are published at an early stage to gain feedback from users in their development before being designated as National Statistics. We would welcome feedback on this bulletin and would be particularly interested in hearing about how the data are used. Please contact us via email: nationalwell-being@ons.gsi.gov.uk or telephone Dawn Snape on 01633 45 5674.
Overview

Personal Well-being 2012/2013

How satisfied are you with your life nowadays?

77% say 7 or more out of 10

1.2 percentage points on previous year

To what extent do you feel that the things in your life are worthwhile?

81% say 7 or more out of 10
Key Figures

The latest findings from the ONS Annual Population Survey show a small improvement in personal well-being in the UK between 2011/12 and 2012/13. **Table 1** provides a summary of the key findings.

In Table 1 and throughout the bulletin, two different methods are used to help explain the findings. These are:

- **Distributions** showing how people responded to the personal well-being questions based on the scale from 0 to 10, particularly focusing on the percentage of people who rated their well-being at the higher or lower end of the scale;
- **Averages** based on ratings for each aspect of personal well-being on the 0 to 10 point scale. This provides another summary measure that allows comparisons using a single number for each aspect of personal well-being.

**Table 1: Overall personal well-being, 2011/12 & 2012/13 (1)**

**United Kingdom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Life Satisfaction</th>
<th>Worthwhile</th>
<th>Happy yesterday</th>
<th>Anxious yesterday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Rating 7-10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>71.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>77.0</td>
<td>80.7</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Annual % point change</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.2</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>0.7</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>0.5</strong>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Rating 0-4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual % point change</strong></td>
<td><strong>-0.9</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>-0.5</strong>*</td>
<td><strong>-0.5</strong>*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% Rating 0-3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2012/13</td>
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<td><strong>Annual % point change</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>1.4</strong>*</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Rating 6-10</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
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<td>2012/13</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Annual % point change</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>-0.9</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Averages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average</th>
<th></th>
<th>% Rating 6-10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/12</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/13</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Annual point change  |  0.04* |  0.03* |  0.01 | Annual point change  |  -0.11*

Table source: Office for National Statistics

Table notes:
1. * indicates change is significant at the 0.05 level.

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Changes between 2011/12 and 2012/13

Overall, between 2011/12 and 2012/13 there was a small improvement in personal well-being in the UK.

Distributions

One way to present personal well-being data is to look at the percentage of people who gave particular ratings to each of the personal well-being questions on the 0 to 10 scale where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘completely’. Comparisons can then be made about how these have changed between 2011/12 and 2012/13.

**Figure 1** below provides these estimates for each aspect of personal well-being and ONS have developed an [interactive tool](#) to illustrate this information.
Figure 1: Distribution of responses for personal well-being, 2011/12 & 2012/13 (1)

United Kingdom

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics

Notes:
1. Adults aged 16 and over were asked ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?’, ‘Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?’, ‘Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?’ and ‘Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?’ where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘completely’.

In order to summarise the information in Figure 1, the different ratings on the scale are grouped and the percentages of the UK adult population giving a range of ratings is then presented.

Higher personal well-being
Higher levels of personal well-being for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness are defined as 7 or more out of 10. However, for anxiety 3 or less out of 10 is used because lower levels of anxiety indicate better personal well-being.

Summary findings in relation to changes in personal well-being between 2011/12 and 2012/13 on this basis show:

• an overall improvement in life satisfaction. The proportion of people rating their life satisfaction as 7 or more out of 10 rose from 75.9% to 77.0%;
• an overall reduction in anxiety levels. The proportion of people rating their anxiety at a low level of 3 or less out of 10 increased from 60.1% to 61.5%;
• an increase in the percentage of people giving higher ratings for worthwhile and happiness, from 80.0% to 80.7% and 71.1% to 71.6% respectively. The size of these increases was smaller than for the other questions, but they were statistically significant.

Lower personal well-being

It is equally important to look at whether there were changes in the proportion of people giving lower ratings of life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness or higher ratings of anxiety. This helps to clarify whether improvements in the personal well-being of some were off-set by deterioration in the well-being of others.

For life-satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness ratings, 0 to 4 out of 10 are used to indicate lower well-being. However for anxiety, ratings of 6 to 10 out of 10 are used because higher ratings for this question suggest greater anxiety (10 out of 10 being ‘completely anxious’) and therefore indicate worse personal well-being. A reduction in the percentage of people rating anxiety as 6 to 10 out of 10 would therefore show an improvement in anxiety levels.

Key findings in relation to changes in lower personal well-being between 2011/12 and 2012/13 include:

• a decrease in people rating their life satisfaction as 4 or less out of 10. This fell from 6.6% to 5.8%;
• a decrease in people rating their anxiety at 6 or more out of 10. This fell from 21.8% to 20.9%;
• for both worthwhile and happiness, the proportions of people giving ratings of 4 or less out of 10 also fell - from 4.9% to 4.4% for worthwhile and from 10.9% to 10.3% for happiness.

Average ratings of personal well-being

As well as presenting estimates in this way, it is also possible to provide the average (mean) rating as a summary measure for each aspect of personal well-being and comparisons between 2011/12 and 2012/13 can then be made.

On this basis key points to note include:
• the average ratings for life satisfaction increased by 0.04 points, worthwhile by 0.03 points and happiness 0.01 points;
• the annual increases in average life satisfaction and worthwhile were statistically significant, but the change in happiness was not;
• the largest change was in average ratings for anxiety which decreased by 0.11 points and was statistically significant.

The change in context

The overall improvement in personal well-being is small but is consistent across the four aspects of personal well-being measured. The reasons for the small improvement between 2011/12 and 2012/13 are not fully understood at this stage.

The factors affecting personal well-being are complex and will differ from person to person and further analysis and research is required to better understand the drivers of personal well-being at the national level. This includes understanding how wider economic and social circumstances and events affect people's assessments of personal well-being.

Recent ONS analysis on ‘What matters most to personal well-being?’ (ONS, 2013a) found that after taking other possible influences into account, the factors most associated with personal well-being are health, employment situation and relationship status.

The labour market picture worsened during 2011 but has generally been improving since then. Unemployment peaked in the autumn of 2011 but then decreased steadily throughout most of 2012. The number of job vacancies remained close to its record low during 2011 but began to rise in early 2012 and this has continued through to spring 2013 when it reached its highest since autumn 2008 (ONS, 2013b).

The period of 2012/13 also included several special events in the UK, such as the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee (in June 2012) which included a special bank holiday and the 2012 Summer Olympic and Paralympic games (July to early September 2012). These events could also have potentially influenced people's assessment of their personal well-being in the 2012/13 period.

In addition, data for similar periods from non-official sources seem to be in keeping with the ONS estimates from the APS:

• the Gallup World Poll found a 2 percentage point increase in the proportion of people in the UK deemed to be ‘thriving’ in July to August 2012 compared to the previous year (Gallup World Poll, 2012);
• the Which? Consumer Insight Tracker found that people were also more satisfied with their lives in the period from January to March 2013 than they had been in the previous quarter despite ‘strong pessimism about personal finances and the economy’ (Which?, 2013);
The data from the World Database of Happiness also provides estimates of life satisfaction in the UK between 2002 and 2012. This provides a useful context for understanding life satisfaction in the UK over a longer period of time than is available from the APS.

Figure 2: Average life satisfaction in the UK, 2002 - 2012 (1)

United Kingdom

Notes:
1. Life satisfaction data are as a proportion of Great Britain respondents who stated that they were fairly or very satisfied when answering the question: ‘On the whole how satisfied are you with the life you lead?’ – with the responses 1) not at all satisfied; 2) not very satisfied; 3) fairly satisfied; 4) very satisfied. This was then increased to a 10 point scale by linear stretch. The data used is for the Autumn quarter where available.
• a decrease in life satisfaction associated with the recession in 2008;
• the average level of life satisfaction in the UK recovered between 2008 and 2009 and reached a high point in 2009 and 2010 after which it began to fall again;
• in keeping with the latest findings from the APS, average life satisfaction increased in 2012 compared with 2011.

**European comparisons**

In order to put the findings from the 2011-13 period into context, it is helpful to look at how personal well-being in the UK compares to other European countries. To do this estimates from the European Quality of Life Survey have been used for 2007 and 2011.

**Figure 3** shows how life satisfaction in the UK has changed since the year before the recession and how this compares to other European countries. Key points to note:

- life satisfaction in the UK is high on average compared to many other countries. The UK ranked tenth for life satisfaction out of the 27 European Union countries, with an average rating of 7.3 out of 10 in 2011;
- life satisfaction in the UK was the same in 2007 as it was in 2011;
- however, over the same period, there was a fall in life satisfaction among all the other countries ranked higher than the UK for life satisfaction in 2011;
- the majority of countries ranked lower than the UK in 2011 experienced an increase in life satisfaction over this period, although there were exceptions such as Greece.

The picture of stability in life satisfaction in the UK from 2007 to 2011 stands in contrast to the changes in life satisfaction among many other European countries over the same period.
Figure 3: Average life satisfaction, by European country, 2007 & 2011 (1,2)

Sex, age and ethnicity

Overall personal well-being estimates differ by people's personal characteristics including sex, age and ethnicity.

Personal well-being of men and women
Consistent with findings from other studies and previous ONS analysis, there are small but statistically significant differences in how men and women rate their personal well-being. For example, the 2012/13 APS data show:

- on average, women have higher life satisfaction, consider their activities to be more worthwhile and rate their happiness slightly higher than men;
- women also rate their anxiety levels significantly higher than men. The average anxiety rating for women is 3.1 compared with 2.9 for men.

In terms of changes between 2011/12 and 2012/13, both men and women reported a small reduction in their levels of anxiety. Additionally, both sexes reported small improvements in life satisfaction, worthwhile activities and happiness levels, none of these were statistically significant.

### Age and personal well-being

Previous research has found that older and younger people rate their life satisfaction more highly than those in mid life (Dolan et al., 2008; ONS, 2013a). Life satisfaction ratings also decline among those in their late seventies onwards.

The 2012/13 APS results, shown in Figure 4, are consistent with these findings and show:

- average levels of life satisfaction, worthwhile activities and happiness levels were lowest for people aged 45 to 54;
- younger people gave higher average ratings than those in mid life and those aged 65 to 79 had significantly higher average ratings than any other age group for both worthwhile and happiness;
- those aged 80 and over gave lower average ratings for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness than those aged 65 to 79.

Recent analysis by ONS looked at factors associated with well-being among older people (ONS, 2013c) and one possible reason for the lower average levels of life satisfaction, worthwhile activities and happiness levels for those aged 80 and over could be related to feeling lonely. Those in this age group report higher levels of loneliness and those who feel lonely are more likely to report lower life satisfaction levels on average.

Figure 4 also shows that:

- those in their early thirties to late fifties rated their anxiety levels highest;
- younger people rated their anxiety at lower levels than those in mid life. Although the lowest average levels of anxiety appear to be among those aged 65 and over, they were not significantly different to the anxiety levels of those aged 16 to 19 (the latter are not shown as a separate group in Figure 4);
- interestingly, those aged 80 and over did not have higher levels of anxiety on average than those aged 65 to 79.

A growing body of research (Dolan et al, 2008) consistently finds this relationship between age and well-being. Two possible explanations have been suggested:
personal well-being may change as we move through life and have different experiences, responsibilities and circumstances which change our perspectives,

this may be a ‘cohort’ effect in which people born in different eras have different experiences and expectations which shape their well-being.

Work in this area is ongoing and there is still no definitive explanation as to why people’s well-being typically decreases in mid life.
Figure 4: Average personal well-being, by age group, 2012/2013

United Kingdom
Between 2011/12 and 2012/13, there have been some small changes in how people of different ages rate their well-being. For example, between 2011/12 and 2012/13:

- there were reductions in anxiety levels across most age groups but those aged 80 and over reported the largest decrease. The average rating for anxiety among this group fell from 2.9 to 2.6 out of 10.

### Personal well-being and ethnicity

Table 2 shows the average personal well-being ratings across ethnic groups for 2012/13. Key findings to note are that:

- the White and Indian respondents are on average the most satisfied with their lives while the Black/African/Caribbean/Black British respondents are the least satisfied. There is a statistically significant difference in life satisfaction between these groups. The average life satisfaction rating for both the White and Indian groups is 7.5, compared to 6.9 for the Black/African/Caribbean/Black British group.

The distinct differences in personal well-being ratings between ethnic groups may be due to:

- differences in the life experiences, circumstances and perspectives of people from different ethnic groups; or
- cultural or linguistic differences in the way people interpret the personal well-being questions or the meaning of the 0 to 10 scale or both.

These are areas where further research would be helpful in clarifying why personal well-being differs between ethnic groups.
**Table 2: Average personal well-being, by ethnic group, 2012/13**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Life satisfaction</th>
<th>Worthwhile</th>
<th>Happy yesterday</th>
<th>Anxious yesterday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
<td>..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
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<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any other Asian background</td>
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<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African/Caribbean/Black British</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other ethnic group</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table source:** Office for National Statistics

**Table notes:**
1. Sample sizes too small for reliable estimates.
2. Differences in the terminology and data collection of the country specific Scotland question makes these categories difficult to compare. The ‘African’ categories in the Scottish question is presented in a separate section to the ‘Caribbean’ or ‘Black’ category, however, under the harmonised output these two categories are combined as part of ‘Black/African/Caribbean/Black British’. The African categories used in Scotland could potentially capture ‘White/Asian/Other African’ in addition to ‘Black’ identities.

Changes were made to the APS ethnicity questions in 2011 as a result of harmonisation and to bring them in line with the Census data collection on this topic. The implementation of this may account for some of the differences found in the personal well-being of ethnic groups between 2011-12 and 2012-13. For this reason, no direct year on year comparisons should be made.
Health and disability

There is a strong association between how people rate their health and how they rate their personal well-being. This has been noted both in academic research and in recently published ONS analysis which found that people’s assessment of their health matters more than any other factor to their personal well-being (ONS, 2013a; Dolan et al, 2008).

The findings for 2012/13 are consistent with this. In general, the better people say their health is, the higher they rate their life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness and the lower they rate their anxiety. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5: Average personal well-being, by self reported health, 2012/13

United Kingdom

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics
In terms of change between 2011/12 and 2012/13:

- there were no significant changes in average ratings for life satisfaction, worthwhile or happiness for any of the self-reported health groups;
- there was a small but significant improvement in average anxiety levels among those rating their health ‘very good’, ‘good’ or ‘fair’;
- there was no significant change for any of the personal well-being measures among those rating their health as ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’.

It is important to highlight that the measure of health used here is based on people’s views of their health rather than on objective information about people’s health. As such, it is likely to reflect people’s emotional as well as physical state and the degree of optimism they have about their health. Similarly, people’s ratings of their well-being reflect their emotional state and optimism about life. For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that people’s perceptions of their health are strongly related to their perceptions of their life.

**Disability and personal well-being**

This section focuses on how disabled people rate their personal well-being compared to those without a disability. It is important to note that people who report a disability are a diverse group which includes those with a disability which substantially limits their day-to-day activities, as well as those with a disability which limits the type or amount of work they do, but does not limit their day-to-day activities.

The findings for 2012/13 show that people who report that they have a disability rate their life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness yesterday lower than those who do not report a disability (see [Figure 6](#)). The anxiety levels of people with a disability are also higher on average than those of people without a disability.
Figure 6: Average personal well-being, by disability status, 2012/13

United Kingdom

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics

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In terms of change between 2011/12 and 2012/13, there were improvements in average personal well-being for both disabled and non-disabled people including:

- a small increase in average ratings of life satisfaction for both disabled and non-disabled people;
- a small decrease in average ratings of anxiety for both disabled and non-disabled people.
Relationships

Previous research into personal well-being has found that being in a stable relationship is linked to higher personal well-being (Dolan et al., 2008; ONS, 2013a). By contrast, people who are not in a relationship report lower life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness, and higher anxiety.

Figure 7 shows the most recent findings for life satisfaction across people in different relationship situations.

- people who are married or in civil partnerships rate their life satisfaction highest, with the average score at 7.8 out of 10. This is significantly higher than for cohabiting couples who reported an average of 7.6 out of 10;
- single people rated their life satisfaction significantly lower than those who are married, in a civil partnership or a cohabiting couple, or widowed at an average of 7.2 out of 10;
- people who are divorced or separated, including those who have dissolved civil partnerships rated their life satisfaction lowest, at an average of 6.8 out of 10.

Although these findings suggest that divorced people have the worst life satisfaction of all the relationship groups, previous analysis by ONS shows that widowed people have lower well-being on average when other influences on well-being such as age group are taken into account (ONS, 2013a).
Figure 7: Average life satisfaction, by relationship status, 2012/13

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics

Notes:
1. 'Married' includes people in civil partnerships.
2. 'Divorced' includes people who are separated and people in dissolved civil partnerships.

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Changes between 2011/12 and 2012/13 include:
• an improvement in average ratings for life satisfaction among those who are divorced or separated;
• a reduction in average ratings for anxiety among those who are married or civil partners, divorced, separated or widowed.

Work situation

Work is clearly an important aspect of life for many of us. As well as providing obvious material benefits such as income and a pension, employment can also provide psychological benefits such as a sense of purpose, social status, social interaction and a daily routine. This section looks at the relationship between work and personal well-being.

The findings here focus on employment status, that is, whether people are employed, unemployed or economically inactive. People are referred to as ‘economically inactive’ if they are not participating in the labour market.

Employment status and personal well-being

Previous research has shown that unemployment has a negative effect on personal well-being (Dolan et al., 2008) and this is supported by analysis of the most recent ONS data and by regression analysis published by ONS earlier this year (ONS, 2013a). As Figure 8 shows, average ratings for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness are all lower for those who unemployed than for those in employment. Taking one example:

• Unemployed people rate their life satisfaction significantly lower on average than employed people. The average life satisfaction rating of unemployed people is 6.6 out of 10 compared to 7.6 for employed people.

Unemployed people also have significantly higher anxiety levels than those in employment:

• The average anxiety rating of unemployed people is 3.4 out of 10 compared to 3.0 for people in employment.
As Figure 8 shows, people who are unemployed also have lower personal well-being than those who are economically inactive. Specifically:

- Unemployed people rate their life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness lower on average than people who are economically inactive. They also rate their ‘anxiety’ higher than those who are economically inactive.

In terms of changes between 2011/12 and 2012/13:
• there was a small increase in average life satisfaction ratings among people who are employed;
• there was a reduction in average ratings for anxiety among those who are employed or economically inactive;
• there were no statistically significant changes in average personal well-being ratings among unemployed people.

These findings suggest that it will be important to continue to monitor the personal well-being gap between unemployed people and others over time to see whether it is widening. This is particularly so in the context of recent increases in long-term unemployment in the UK.

Economic inactivity and personal well-being

Given that there are a wide range of reasons why people are economically inactive, it is useful to look at whether well-being differs depending upon people’s reason for economic inactivity. Figure 9 shows that life satisfaction ratings vary greatly depending on the reason for economic inactivity.
Figure 9: Average life satisfaction, by reason for economic inactivity, 2012/13

United Kingdom

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) - Office for National Statistics

Notes:
1. The 'student' category refers specifically to those students who are economically inactive.

Download chart
XLS format
(29.5 Kb)

Key findings to note are that:
among the economically inactive groups, retired people and students are the most satisfied with their lives on average. The life satisfaction ratings of people in these two groups were significantly higher than for all the other economic inactivity groups;

ratings for worthwhile were significantly higher among those looking after a home or family than for all other groups except retired people;

those who are not in work due to temporary or long term sickness are least satisfied with their lives. They also have higher anxiety on average and lower levels of worthwhile and happiness than those giving other reasons for economic inactivity;

the ‘discouraged worker’ group is comprised of those who said their main reason for not seeking work was because they believed there were no jobs available. Apart from those who are not working due to temporary or long term sickness, their life satisfaction is lower on average than other economically inactive groups.

These findings are consistent with those of other ONS analysis which found particularly low average ratings for all four well-being questions among the group who were sick or disabled. The same study found that after taking into account other factors that may affect well-being, retired people who said that they do not need to work have even higher personal well-being than people who are working (ONS, 2013a).

**Full-time or part-time work and personal well-being**

Previous studies have found no difference in life satisfaction between those working full-time or part-time (Bardasi and Francesconi, 2004). However, the recent findings from the APS show that those working part-time rate their life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness slightly higher on average than those working full-time and the differences are statistically significant. There are no differences in the average anxiety levels of those working full or part-time. (See Figure 10)
As noted in relation to economic inactivity, there are a variety of reasons why people may work full or part-time. If their reasons are to do with positive choices rather than perceived constraints, we would expect this to be reflected in higher personal well-being. **Figure 11** shows how personal well-being differs among those working part-time depending upon their reasons for doing so.
Key findings to note are that on average:

- those who work part-time because they are students and those who did not want a full-time job had higher levels of life satisfaction on average than those working part-time for other reasons;
- those who work part-time because they are ill or disabled have a similar level of life satisfaction on average as those who could not find a full-time job, but they have much higher anxiety than other groups;
- those working part-time because they did not want a full time job had the highest sense that their activities are worthwhile. Their anxiety levels are very similar to those of students;
- those working part-time because they could not find a full time job had a similar personal well-being profile to those who work part-time due to illness or disability for life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness.
The findings again suggest that on average, those who make a positive choice to work part-time either because they are students or because they do not want a full-time job have a greater sense of personal well-being. By contrast, those whose choices have been constrained by illness, disability, or perceived inability to get a full-time job have lower average personal well-being.

### Methodology

The data analysed in this release are derived from customised weighted 12 month Annual Population Survey (APS) microdatasets. These datasets are not part of the regularly produced APS datasets and were produced specifically for the analysis of personal well-being data. ONS is making the experimental APS microdatas available to approved researchers to allow them to undertake further analysis of these experimental questions at an early stage and to provide further feedback to ONS.

#### Choice of questions

The experimental questions included in the Annual Population Survey were developed with expert academic advice (Dolan et al. 2011) as well as benefiting from discussions between members of the National Statistician’s Measuring National Well-being Advisory Forum and Technical Advisory Group. They represent a balanced approach to the measurement of personal well-being drawing on the three main theoretical approaches identified in the academic literature on the subject (Dolan et al. 2011, ONS, 2011a) and are designed to collect information on different aspects of people’s personal well-being. The three different approaches to measuring personal well-being are:

- the ‘evaluative’ approach in which people are asked to reflect on their life and make a cognitive assessment of how their life is going overall or of how specific aspects of their life are going;
- the ‘eudemonic’ approach, sometimes referred to as the psychological or functioning/flourishing approach, which draws on self-determination theory and measures people’s sense of meaning and purpose in life, connections with family and friends, a sense of control and whether they feel part of something bigger than themselves;
- the ‘experience’ approach which measures people’s positive and negative experiences (or affect) over a short timeframe to capture people’s personal well-being on a day-to-day basis.

The questions that ONS has asked on its household surveys include:

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? (evaluative approach)
- Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? (eudemonic approach)
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? (experience approach)
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (experience approach).

All are answered using a 0 to 10 scale where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is ‘completely’.
Further information on the ONS approach to measuring personal well-being can be found in the paper ‘Measuring Subjective Well-being’ (240.8 Kb Pdf) published by ONS in July 2011.

Survey design

The Annual Population Survey (APS), first conducted in 2004, combines results from waves one and five of the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the English, Welsh and Scottish LFS boosts. The survey asks 155,000 households and 360,000 people per dataset about their own circumstances and experiences regarding a range of subjects including housing, employment and education. The survey provides enhanced data on key social and socio-economic variables. For the personal well-being questions, responses by proxy are not collected. That is only people who respond directly to the survey are included rather than including responses made on behalf of other people. For this reason the sample size for the personal well-being data is around 165,000 people.

One of the benefits of collecting personal well-being data on a large scale survey such as APS is that large sample sizes, all else being equal, produce smaller standard errors. The standard error is an indication of the accuracy of an estimate and gives users an indication of how close the sample estimator (in this case the personal well-being estimates) is to the population value: the larger the standard error, the less precise the estimator. Large sample sizes also allow for comparisons across population groups and areas.

The APS is a mixed mode survey and uses both face-to-face and telephone interviews. Different collection modes can affect responses and personal well-being estimates are no exception. For example in the Annual Population Survey it appears from the aggregate estimates that on average people responding face-to-face with an interviewer in their home give different ratings to those responding via the telephone (see Table 3). Further investigation is required to ascertain why this may be the case.

Higher average ratings for the life satisfaction, worthwhile, happy yesterday questions and a slightly lower average for the anxious yesterday question were provided by respondents interviewed via the telephone compared with those who are asked personal well-being questions face-to-face, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Average personal well-being, by mode of interview, 2012/13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worthwhile</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy yesterday</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious yesterday</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table source: Office for National Statistics
This issue is particularly important for the APS as all interviews in Scotland north of the Caledonian Canal are administered by telephone only, rather through a combination of telephone and face-to-face interviews, as is the case in other areas of the UK.

There are a number of other methodological issues which have been or are being tested on the Opinions Survey, for more information see (ONS, 2011b). These include:

- **Contextual effects** - responses to evaluative questions can be affected by the respondent’s current mood and by the immediate context, however, the idiosyncratic effects of recent events are likely to average out in a large, representative population sample like the APS.

- **Question order** – responses to personal well-being questions have been shown to be affected by earlier questions in the survey (for example, questions about health or labour market status). Prior to April 2011, ONS carried out small scale cognitive testing of the placement of the personal well-being questions. As a result it was decided that the placement of the overall monitoring questions would be fairly early on in the questionnaire after the basic questions on household and individual demographics. This allows time for rapport to be built up between the interviewer without allowing later questions, such as those on employment, to influence response to the personal well-being questions.

- **Response scales** - different response scales for personal well-being questions have been used on different surveys. Differences in scaling and labeling of scale points require careful consideration as they are likely to affect how people respond. Additionally the use of different scales in different surveys means that it is more difficult to compare across different sources of data. It appears that the way the scales are labelled can also have an impact on these estimates and that is something that needs further investigation. ONS decided that an 11 point scale from 0–10 where 0 is ‘not at all’ and 10 is an absolute value such as ‘completely’ should be used for all the APS personal well-being questions. The reason for this decision was to ensure that the scales between the questions are consistent in order to help respondents answer the questions more easily and also to aid analysis across the separate questions. Further to this, 11 point scales are commonly used across other similar surveys, particularly internationally, and using the same type of scale will aid comparisons with these estimates.

- **Question wording** - it is not only response scales that differ from survey to survey but also question wording, including the use of time frames. ONS has used both cognitive testing techniques and split trial testing of data collected on the Opinions Survey to ascertain the impact these differences have on estimates. This is especially important with respect to issues such as harmonisation of question wording across surveys in order to gain comparable results.

### Interpreting personal well-being estimates

When comparing differences between average ratings for groups it is important to realise that these comparisons are made using aggregate statistics based on samples with those characteristics. Just because the average of the sample has a certain rating of personal well-being does not necessarily...
mean that all people with that certain characteristic have that particular outcome. For example, even though women on average have higher life satisfaction than men, it is important not to infer that all women are more satisfied with their lives than men. Looking at the percentage below or above different thresholds goes some way in addressing this. However, it is also important not to infer that what is true for part of the sample with a certain characteristic is true for all people with that characteristic.

It is also important to note that although personal well-being estimates in this bulletin have been analysed by different personal characteristics and circumstances, this should not be taken to imply causation. Although some groups are more likely to give higher life satisfaction ratings on average it may not be the particular characteristic that is causing them to have higher personal well-being. There are other factors that could also be influencing their ratings which would need to be controlled for in a regression model, and even then causation is often difficult to infer. For example, although married people on average give higher levels of happiness it is difficult to say with certainty that marriage increases happiness or whether actually people who are happy are more likely to marry.

The size of differences between average ratings of personal well-being for groups of people with certain characteristics or in different circumstances can appear fairly small. These differences must be interpreted in light of the fact that personal well-being is affected by many different life circumstances with a variety of factors having a bearing on a person’s personal well-being. For example, if someone is in poor health, that is only one aspect of their lives so when making a cognitive judgment about how satisfied they are with their lives overall, although their poor health may have a bearing, other factors may mitigate against that and mean they do not give such a low score as we may perhaps first expect.

Additionally it should be noted that the health measure used is this bulletin is self-reported health, and like the four personal well-being questions relies on the person's own perceptions. This could be a factor in the reason for the strong association between these measures.

**Uses of the data**

Personal well-being data is useful for better decision making, for policy makers, individuals, communities, business and civil society. It complements other measures of progress and quality of life such as unemployment and household income and is used by the Office for National Statistics to better monitor and understand national well-being.

One of the main benefits of personal well-being data is that it is based on people’s views of their own individual well-being. Without it, assumptions need to be made about how objective conditions, such as people’s health and income, might influence their individual well-being. Personal well-being measures, on the other hand, are grounded in individuals' preferences and take account of what
matters most to them by allowing them to decide what is important when providing an assessment of their own quality of life.

The uses of personal well-being data are varied, but in particular four main uses have been identified:

- overall monitoring of national well-being,
- use in the policy making process,
- international comparison,
- public decision making.

**Overall monitoring of national well-being**

Collected regularly, personal well-being data can provide an indication of how the well-being of a nation is changing. However, to get a full picture of national well-being, ONS believe it is important to use this information to supplement existing objective information. ONS have identified different aspects (or domains) of well-being that sit alongside the personal well-being domain. These include such areas as health, our relationships, what we do, where we live, personal finance, education and skills, the economy, the environment and governance.

The [National Well-being wheel of measures](#) includes indicators for all these aspects of national well-being, and personal well-being estimates from the APS are used with other indicators to monitor the overall well-being of the UK.

**Use in the policy making process**

Personal well-being data, within the framework of wider measures to understand national well-being is intended to inform policy development so that it focuses on what matters most in people’s lives. How people think and feel about their lives is an important addition to official statistics from which policy makers can draw to make more rounded decisions focussed on quality of life. There is an emerging demand for personal well-being information to support policy development and the government has begun to use the experimental data to better account for well-being in policy development.

**Identifying need and targeting policies**

The large sample size of this experimental personal well-being dataset from the Annual Population Survey allows for comparisons between different groups of the population (for example, different age groups or different ethnic groups) and between different areas within the UK (for example, countries and local authority districts). This can help policy-makers target policy at the groups or areas with highest need in terms of personal well-being.

Analysis can also be carried out to look at how different objective domains relate to personal well-being and which have the biggest impact on personal well-being. In May 2013, ONS published analysis looking at ‘What matters most to personal well-being?’ (ONS 2013a) and this identified health, relationship
status and employment status as the factors most highly associated with personal well-being in the Annual Population Survey.

Policy appraisal

Another use is in cost-benefit analysis in policy appraisal. Personal well-being estimates can provide an alternative method to value the costs and benefits of different policies. This process could also help inform decisions around which forms of spending will lead to the largest increases in personal well-being (Dolan et al, 2011).

The Green Book is HM Treasury's guide for government departments on the appraisal of the costs and benefits of projects through social cost-benefit analysis. A Green Book discussion paper (Fujiwara & Campbell, 2011), produced jointly by HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions, looks at the potential uses of personal well-being measures in social cost-benefit analysis. Another recent example of the use of personal well-being data in this area has been to produce a method for the monetary valuation of volunteering (Fujawara et al, 2013).

Evaluation and monitoring of policy

Personal well-being data can also be used to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of policy interventions. A recent example is the National Citizen Service where a pilot evaluated the personal well-being of young people before and after their participation in the service. The results show increases in personal well-being among participants, before and after involvement, compared with a control group of peers over the same period. As well as government interventions, other civil society and third sector interventions could be evaluated in a similar way.

Added to this, looking at policies through a ‘well-being lens’ and using data to inform not only the formulation of policy but also how policy could be better implemented with people’s well-being in mind is also important. The Social Impacts Taskforce (SITF), comprising of senior analysts from across government, has been working to make use of personal well-being data and share approaches and findings across government. The Cabinet Office has also convened a cross-Whitehall steering group of senior policy makers to encourage the consideration of well-being in policy. Separate initiatives to investigate well-being are being undertaken by the devolved governments. These include: the National Performance Framework, which forms part of the ‘Scotland performs’ initiative and the recently published ‘Analysis of subjective well-being in Wales: Evidence from the Annual Population Survey’. These initiatives reflect the specific needs of the countries they represent.

Further information, including case studies of how personal well-being data is beginning to be used in the policy process is available in recent government evidence submitted by the Cabinet Office to the Environmental Audit Committee as part of their inquiry on well-being.

International comparisons

The benefit of understanding where the UK is placed compared to other nations is an important reason for the collection of personal well-being data.
There is increasing demand from international organisations to develop personal well-being estimates and increasing recognition internationally that this should be included in official data collection.

Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Union) have started to collect personal well-being statistics from member states as part of the European Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) in an ad-hoc well-being module in 2013. Eurostat's Quality of Life Indicators, currently being developed, will also include personal well-being information to supplement objective information already collected across Europe.

The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has also recently developed guidance on the measurement of personal well-being. This can be seen as a first step towards harmonised international standards for the measurement of personal well-being.

Public decision making

ONS personal well-being data could also be used by the public in a number of ways. These include:

- informing public debate and discussion about what matters most,
- using well-being data to make a judgement on how the government is doing in terms of increasing the well-being of the nation,
- informing life-style choices and making better decisions in terms of how they impact on personal well-being, for example the ‘five ways to well-being’ that stress the importance of social connections, being active, taking notice of surroundings, learning and giving of time and money.

ONS is committed to making personal well-being data accessible and engaging and the ONS Measuring National Well-being web-page has links to interactive charts and maps to enable people to explore the data further.

About the ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme

NWB logo 2
This statistical bulletin is published as part of the ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme.

The programme aims to produce accepted and trusted measures of the well-being of the nation - how the UK as a whole is doing.

Measuring National Well-being is about looking at ‘GDP and beyond’. It includes headline indicators in areas such as health, relationships, job satisfaction, economic security, education, environmental conditions and measures of ‘subjective well-being’ (individuals’ assessment of their own well-being).

Find out more on the Measuring National Well-being website pages.

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**Background notes**

1. These statistics are experimental in nature and published at an early stage to gain feedback from users. Should users have comments on the ONS approach to the measurement of personal well-being and or the presentation of the personal well-being questions they can email ONS at nationalwell-being@ons.gsi.gov.uk. It is the role of the UK Statistics Authority to designate these statistics as National Statistics and one of the aspirations of the National Well-being programme is to see these statistics gain National Statistics status.

2. Data analysed in this report relates to APS data from April 2012 to March 2013 unless stated otherwise.

3. The data analysed in this bulletin was collected from the Annual Population Survey (APS). The sample size of the 12 month APS personal well-being dataset is 165,000 adults aged 16 and over and living in residential accommodation in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Data used are weighted to be representative of the population, unless otherwise stated.

4. A list of the job titles of those given pre-release access to the contents of this Statistical Bulletin is available on the website.

5. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available by visiting the UK Statistics Authority or from the Media Relations Office.

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This document is also available on our website at www.ons.gov.uk.

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