

# Bureau Briefing Paper: Implementing the Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement

The United Nations Network of Economic Statisticians

May 2024

## 1. Purpose of this Paper

- 1.1. Following the commission from the UNSC to the Network to launch an Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement, members of the Network Bureau who also participated in the task-team who ran the 'Beyond GDP' sprints convened to draft this short paper outlining a roadmap and purpose of this Expert Group for ratification by the Network's Bureau.

### Recommendation

- 1.2. **The Bureau agree with the proposed model of working and objective of this new Expert Group and proceeds to invite Network members to join a bureau for the Expert Group.**

## 2. Chapeau

- 2.1. It is self-evident that our policies and collective actions should pursue to maximize the wellbeing of present and future generations for everyone, everywhere, while safeguarding our planet and bringing prosperity for all. In the pursuit of this maxim, the United Nations Statistical Commission has invited the UN network of Economic Statisticians to deliver an Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement to provide technical measurement advice to ensure opportunities can be seized.
- 2.2. The UN Summit of the Future, scheduled for September 2024, aims to address major policy issues to meet today's global challenges, centered around re-invigorating multilateralism, addressing global governance gaps, and re-affirming commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Charter. Key focus areas include sustainable development and related financing, international peace and security, science, technology, innovation and digital cooperation, youth and future generations, and transforming global governance.
- 2.3. The Summit will also address new ways to improve and expand ways of measuring human progress so that human and planetary well-being are not overlooked, so data is available to inform policy-making at all levels. What really matters for sustainable development impact, progress and resource-allocation is access to measures based on a comprehensive set of critical metrics that complement GDP and cover what is needed for prosperity, human well-being, and protecting our natural environment. This is achieved through:
  - a political commitment to value what counts, accompanied by
  - a dashboard of key indicators to aide understanding, communication and navigation,
  - a wider system of statistics and data which can allow policy-makers to 'deep-dive' into key issues and trade-offs, and
  - support to countries on related statistical and data capacities, to build the system's capability to meet user needs.
- 2.4. Following this Summit, the proposal is for the Network to convene the Expert Group to take forward development of statistical guidance to support this agenda at pace.

## 3. Background

- 3.1. The topic of Wellbeing measurement, or as it is often labelled, the 'Beyond GDP' agenda is a rich one with a strong history of academic and official papers, delivering multiple competing

models and a rich ecosystem of models, alternatives and estimates. Key papers stretch back to at least JS Mills ‘Utilitarianism’ but in more recent times we can pick out:

- Sir Richard Stone’s ‘System of National Accounts’ (1968) and nascent [‘System of Social and Demographic Statistics’](#) (1974),
- [‘Our Common Future’](#); the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission,
- The development of the Millennium Development Goals,
- The report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission in 2009 and the development of the OECD’s Better Life Framework in response to this,
- The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, and
- The production of the 2019 Human Development Report – which applied the three ‘Beyonds’ – income, average and today – to disaggregate ‘Beyond GDP’. The UNDP in its Human Development Report 2019 and its subsequent annual reports proposes a complementary measure beyond GDP. In particular, the reports aims at addressing inequalities in human development by expanding the focus beyond traditional metrics. It challenges the notion that economic growth alone can lead to human development and emphasizes the need to consider broader dimensions of inequality.<sup>1</sup>

3.2. This list is nowhere close to being comprehensive but indicates the ‘tip of the iceberg’ in this area.

3.3. Over the past three years, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has stimulated renewed action on this topic:

- The UN published [‘Our Common Agenda’](#) in 2021, which called for renewed effort to develop complements to GDP,
- UNSD, UNCTAD and UNDP published the briefing note ‘Valuing What Counts’ in 2023, which proposed how to move forward a dashboard of 20 headline indicators. This proposed a policy focus on measuring progress beyond GDP, considering sustainable development’s social, economic, and environmental dimensions. It also makes the case for supporting statistical capacity building in member states to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly aiming to complement GDP with sustainable development progress measures.
- The UN Network of Economic Statisticians (UNNES) undertook a sprint series on the topic of Beyond GDP in 2022 and published its [‘Research Prospectus’](#) as a background document submitted to the 54<sup>th</sup> UN Statistical Commission where continued research was commissioned.
- In 2023, the UN Network of Economic Statisticians (UNNES) undertook a second sprint series on the topic of implementing the proposals contained in the ‘Research Prospectus’, and published its findings as a [background document](#) to the report of the Network submitted to the 55<sup>th</sup> UN Statistical Commission where the creation of an Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement was approved to deliver a Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> The framework introduced by the reports for analyzing inequalities—beyond income, averages, and the current moment—aims to bring to light the complex and evolving nature of disparities that can hinder the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By highlighting the importance of looking at inequalities through these lenses, the UNDP aims to encourage policies that are more responsive to the needs of all segments of society, ensuring that no one is left behind in the quest for human development.

## 4. Objectives

- 4.1. The Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement has a clear set of objectives:
  - To develop the Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing (FISW), meeting user needs and reflecting producer constraints.
  - To ensure the FISW has a clear conceptual framework which robustly presents data in a methodological fashion such that trade-offs and the wider impacts of policy decisions become visible.
  - To ensure the FISW presents a clear hierarchy and structure to aide user navigation: not all data can or will be prioritized for the headline dashboard.
  - To provide a model headline dashboard for a 'state of the nation' perspective to inform decision-makers and the public of the state of wellbeing for their community, and the impact their community has on others.
  - To support the Friends of the Chair group on Social and Demographic Statistics with their development of a comprehensive framework for social and demographic statistics (which may develop into a Statistical System); specifically through a) providing access and insights from the economic statistics pillar, where there is overlap in the topics covered, and b) providing clarity on the demands for coherent social and demographic data, in terms of definitions and measures, from the FISW.
- 4.2. To do this, the Expert Group will work to:
  - Understand and identify the user community and their needs, alongside insights from academia and other voices including the private sector.
  - Understand and take account of the needs of producers and compilers, and the constraints they face.
  - Undertake out-reach to proactively explain how the FISW helps deliver against user need
  - Produce an output framework with a focus on communication and impact of statistics, rather than their production.
  - Formalize terminology, including the definition of wellbeing, and hierarchies to support framework and definitions in collaboration with the varied expert communities who own the main statistical Standards.
- 4.3. The FISW will be developed under the assumption that it is an explanatory and navigational tool drawing on data whose definition, concept and measurement approach is detailed in either the System of National Accounts, the System of Environmental-Economic Accounts or the framework of social and demographic statistics and their supporting manuals and guidance.
- 4.4. It is not the role of the Network to provide post-production support unless members commission a further set of implementation sprints based on implementing the FISW.

## 5. Conceptual Framework

- 5.1. At the 55<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN Statistical Commission, the UN Network submitted a report on the findings of its analysis, drawing out the following key messages:

- In a world of scarce resources, we must look to re-use as much existing data as possible.
- Sufficient methods work has been undertaken to move quickly, including on the science of measuring subjective wellbeing, we do not need to re-invent the wheel.
- Users need a small, focused core dataset, with enough sophistication and focus to be analytically powerful, but not so large as to obscure policy choices.
- Countries need a permissive framework which identifies a common core set of measures but allows them to add further measures as necessary to meet local need.
- A clear conceptual framework for wellbeing is the key missing component, whereby people' centered wellbeing measures and the measures of their socio-economic and environmental drivers reveal the trade-offs inherent in key policy issues facing decision-makers – such as how to manage the trade-off between producing output to improve the prosperity related measures of quality of life and the negative impact of pollution generated through that production or how to evaluate the impact of measures which improve health security but may be perceived to reduce personal freedoms, such as recent policy responses to the pandemic.

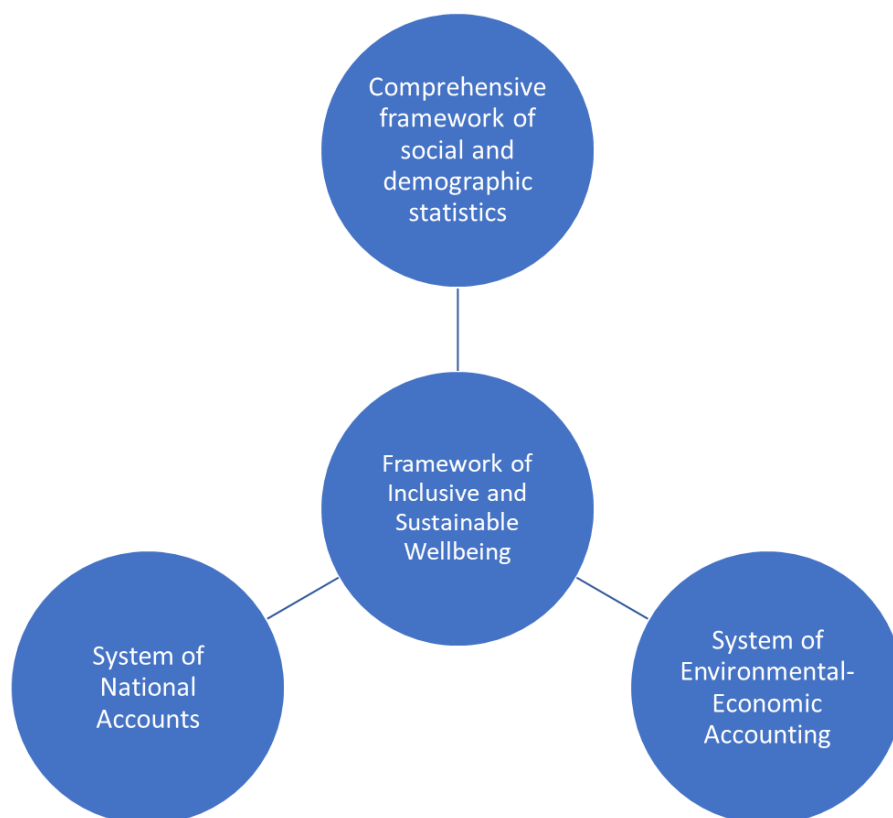
5.2. Taking these as the starting point the 55<sup>th</sup> UN Statistical Commission established an Expert Group on Wellbeing (see decision [55/108](#) of the unedited report) to make rapid progress to provide the Summit of the Future, and future such events, clarity on the direction of our work and the broad outline of our proposal.

### The Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing

- 5.3. The Expert Group is working to draft guidance for statistical compilers in a document we call 'The Framework for Inclusive and Sustainable Wellbeing (FISW) which reflects the four dominant ways of looking at the issue of wellbeing:
- The Brundtland Review dimensions: well-being can be considered in the **here and now**, but this might be achieved at the expense of those **elsewhere**, or in the **future**
  - 'Valuing What Counts' recognizes that in the here and now there are issues of **inclusion and inequality**, including gaps in provision, and of **sustainability and resilience**. This perspective for analyzing inequalities—beyond income, averages, and the current moment—aims to bring to light the complex and evolving nature of disparities is also reflected in UNDP's Human Development Report 2019, titled "Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century" and the work on National Transfer Accounts (NTA) led by DESA Population Division.
  - The National Accounts and System of Environmental-Economic Accounts provide useful frameworks for considering the measurement of **flows**, of **stocks** and of the **distribution** of these between different sections of society.
  - The statistical landscape reflects three pillars: **environmental, social and demographic**, and **economic**.
- 5.4. Underneath these four perspectives, there are ancillary questions related to the perspective we wish to consider this question through.
- **The absolute or relative outcomes lens** – humans are naturally competitive, and it is well recognised that perspectives of well-being can be as dependent on relative positioning vis-à-vis a peer group as absolute measures. How and whether to reflect this is a core question for consideration

- **The people-centric or wider perspective lens** – should humanity be at the heart of a well-being measure and its definition or should it cover a wider canvas, of which humanity is an essential part, but just one part? Different societies (and groups within society) may perceive the answer to this question in markedly different ways
  - **The objective v subjective lens** – what role should subjective measures of well-being take in the measurement system vis-à-vis objective measures of economic, environmental, or social drivers of wellbeing?
  - **The outcome v the drivers lens** – is what matters the outcome or the conditions which deliver these outcomes? Which provides greater policy traction?
- 5.5. Previous efforts to present unified wellbeing guidance have struggled with straddling these different dimensions and providing a unified approach to reviewing the question. The FISW looks to submit a pragmatic strategy to combining these axes into a digestible framework which can be primarily populated using pre-existing data.
- 5.6. To do this the FISW will build on existing statistical of guidance which are already familiar to users, the System of National Accounts (which provides economic data, alongside its related manuals and guidance), the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (which provides environmental data), and the collection of guidance around social and demographic statistics, which our sister group, the Friends of the Chair Group on Social and Demographic Statistics, is reviewing into a comprehensive framework to support this cross-statistics effort to close this data gap (see figure 1). The importance of relying on these existing frameworks comes from being able to access consistent definitions, standards, and previous user engagement to ensure these data are well-rounded, robustly tested, and coherent enough to permit key trade-offs to be understood and quantified within the FISW without imposing extra survey or processing burden on national statistics institutes.
- 5.7. The Framework will be the theoretical ‘cap-stone’ completing the economic system, sign-posting how data can be combined and detailed. As a conceptual document it will rely on and link to wider existing guidance. For practical compilation reasons, the FISW will recognize but side-step the real importance and practical challenges of capability-building within national statistical systems.

Figure 1 – The inter-related system of statistical standards



5.8. In terms of measures, the Framework covers (see table):

- subjective measures of wellbeing, including life satisfaction, feelings, and the degree to which individuals feel their lives have meaning and purpose. How this changes through time, in terms of social and economic mobility could also be considered.
- objective measures of key determinants of inclusive and sustainable well-being, covering the widest landscape of priority areas, including prosperity, health, society, good governance, and the environment. These need to reflect multiple perspectives of these issues, drawn from the social and demographic, environmental, and economic pillars, whilst also recognizing the importance of a combination of flow, stock and distributional indicators
- a universalist scope covering both a) the quality of life and standards of living measures and b) measures of minimum thresholds of deprivation being essential minimum conditions that need to be met for human survival, and where gaps exist between these minima and actual outcomes, such as in relation to poverty and deprivation.

5.9. The Framework will recognize that these people-related outcome measures can be further disaggregated, in theory and dependent on data availability, by:

- relationships, time, and place
- here and now (temporal/current/today), elsewhere (cross border/place), and later (stock/capital)
- population characteristics – special groups, age, gender, etc.

**Table 1: Broad Schematic for a potential model of the Framework**

	<b>Subjective measures of wellbeing</b>	<b>Objective measures of key drivers of wellbeing (Beyond Income)</b>	<b>Objective measures of the degree of Inclusion and Inequality (Beyond Average)</b>	<b>Objective measures of the degree of sustainability and resilience (Beyond Today)</b>
<b>The 'Here and Now' lens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subjective measures of individual wellbeing</li> <li>• Business sentiment</li> </ul>	Flow measures of key drivers from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social,</li> <li>• Environmental</li> <li>• Economic statistics</li> </ul>	Social, economic and environmental flow distributional measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social flow measures</li> <li>• Economic flow measures</li> <li>• Environmental flow measures</li> </ul>
<b>The 'Elsewhere' lens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-border subjective measures</li> <li>• Regional subjective measures</li> </ul>	Social, economic and environmental flow cross-border objective measures	Social, economic and environmental cross-border flow distributional measures	Social, economic and environmental cross-border flow measures
<b>The 'In the Future' lens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social capital stock measures</li> </ul>	Social, economic and environmental stock objective measures	Social, economic and environmental stock distributional measures	Social, economic and environmental stock distributional measures
<b>Potential key data-frames</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social statistics</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social and Demographic Statistics</i></li> <li>• <i>SNA</i></li> <li>• <i>SEEA</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social and Demographic Statistics</i></li> <li>• <i>SNA</i></li> <li>• <i>SEEA</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social and Demographic Statistics</i></li> <li>• <i>SNA</i></li> <li>• <i>SEEA</i></li> </ul>



- 5.10. The FISW will systematically draw data together, consolidating the different approaches taken to this question, and will look to prioritize individual metrics and time series to deliver a comprehensive perspective on wellbeing, where three pillars of material wellbeing, inclusion, and sustainability support a proposed headline measures of subjective wellbeing. The broad schematic of a potential model of the Framework is presented in Table 1.
- 5.11. The FISW aims to deliver a feasible and pragmatic model for the clear communication of the ‘state of the nation’ to inform decision-makers and the public of the state of wellbeing for their community and the impact their community has on others. It aims to do so by do so, recognizing that all statistics in the environmental, social and economic domains have some role to play in this debate. With a focus on a small set of key indicators in a simple dashboard the framework encourages users to seek additional data from the System of National Accounts, the This means that, unlike the model deployed in the Sustainable Development Goals, each key domain may not be individually documented in the headline dashboard, but may include composite indices or representative metrics to provide easy entry-routes into the interrelationships of the of the supporting domain systems and frameworks.
- 5.12. The FISW will therefore serve three distinct functions:
- Explaining the logic behind the conceptual framework in table 1
  - Populating the framework with a tight set of key metrics (c20) to provide a headline dashboard.
  - Providing a roadmap to navigate those who are interested in going deeper where to source further data, by domain, from the wider statistical landscape.
- 5.13. The aim is to deliver a statistical toolkit which, through the headline dashboard provides a clear mechanism for the tackling of the key questions relating to mega-trends and headline topics, particularly where policy decisions in one pillar (economic, environmental and social) may have impacts within the other pillars which may not be immediately obvious. The FISW aims to support transparency of wider impacts from cross-cutting policy decisions. These include, but are not limited to<sup>2</sup>:
- Climate change
  - Urbanization
  - Demographic ageing and other transitions
  - Digitalization
  - Inequality

## 6. The Road Forward

- 6.1. To deliver on this agenda the Expert Group on Wellbeing Measurement will look to deliver new materials to propel this agenda forward, whilst developing a new agile delivery model for this Expert Group.

### *Implementing the Network model into an Expert Group*

- 6.2. The UN Network of Economic Statisticians is an innovative, country-led association of national statistical institutes and other experts to rapidly develop and test new models on the

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<sup>2</sup> [Report of the UN Economist Network for the UN 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Shaping the Trends of Our Time \(2020\).](#)

innovative frontier of economic statistics. It is a lean group with limited standing secretariat resources. The adoption of the normal working models for such an Expert Group, with multiple task-teams or physical meetings is neither viable nor preferable. The Network's model is based around giving countries opportunities to make their voice heard through public debate and information-sharing through virtual sessions which are open to all and any Network members or invited speakers / guests. Our working model is inclusive and based on our belief that every country, large or small, and irrespective of region, has a valuable contribution to make. Our sprint series in 2022 and 2023 demonstrated the impact of these principles, but also the level of interest in this topic, with over two hundred delegates routinely attending our sessions.

- 6.3. The UN Network is assessing the feasibility of testing a new model for operating this Expert Group based on the following principles:
- Expert Group sessions will be open to all Network members, drawing on the wide spread of experience and knowledge within the Network, alongside invited experts, academics and other relevant members.
  - The Expert Group will be chaired by two co-chairs (preferably with one from the global South) representing the diverse nature of the Network.
  - A bureau will be appointed by the Network bureau to undertake logistics and lead drafting outputs from the sessions.
  - Virtual Expert Group session will be held to empower attendance. The Expert Group will explore the potential to dual-run sessions to make timetabling more convenient for more countries, recognizing the secretariat constraints the Expert Group will face.
  - The Expert Group will report back to the 56<sup>th</sup> UN Statistical Commission in 2025 on the success / lessons learnt from this working model through the wider UN Network report.

#### *Production of Outputs*

- 6.4. The agile working model described above aims to enable the delivery at pace of key outputs in the area of wellbeing measurement. These outputs will be the first effort to develop global guidance on this topic and to achieve pace, we need to be realistic in respect to scale of ambition. We also need to reflect that the first version of the SNA was only 48 pages long. Our initial outputs are likely to need to take a similarly strategic vantagepoint before venturing into greater detail in coming years.
- 6.5. Our outputs also need to reflect that there are a wide range of existing documents which already provide much of the methodological detail needed to produce the data we will discuss. Our objective is not to replicate this work but rather to illustrate how to best deploy this data into a unified model of inclusive and sustainable wellbeing.
- 6.6. Finally, whilst our scope covers both wellbeing and the development of a framework for social and demographic statistics, this latter topic clearly primarily lies within the scope of the Friends of the Chair Group for Social and Demographic Statistics. The Expert Group should not be reticent to be clear that whilst it has valid contributions to make to this exercise, these primarily lie in two areas; support in understanding and integrating where economic statisticians have made steps into some of the domains which will be in scope, and secondly, the demands and requirements of the FISW for new or improved data.

- 6.7. There is also an important dimension of this work of relating it to users and ensuring we understand user needs, particularly in relation to a headline dashboard of indicators.
- 6.8. As such, there is a need for the Expert Group to focus in the first instance on the following deliverables:
- April 2024 – Development of a short **paper** (this paper) for ratification by the bureau of the Network for a model of working for the Expert Group
  - April 2024 – **Appointment of the Expert Group bureau** by the bureau of the Network
  - Ongoing – Participation by a subset of the Network bureau in monthly co-ordination meetings between the Network and the Friends of the Chair Group for Social and Demographic Statistics.
  - May 2024 – The drafting of a 10 page **position paper** <sup>3</sup> to submit<sup>4</sup> to the Summit for the Future, drawing on this paper (subject to Bureau comments and amendments) detailing the scope, ambition, and strategic fit for the Expert Group with wider initiatives, and a **Terms of Reference** for ratification by the Network bureau.
  - April-June 2024 – Development of /participation in a **side event** to showcase the Expert Group and its objectives at the Summit for the Future.
  - April-June 2024 – Development of an **itinerary of virtual meetings of the Expert Group** for September 2024 – March 2025
  - September 2024 – (tbc) **Summit of the Future side-event**
  - September 2024 – **1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Expert Group**. Formal launch of Group, appointment of co-chairs and acceptance of Terms of Reference
  - October 2024 – Preparation of materials into include in Network report to **56<sup>th</sup> UNSC**.

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<sup>3</sup> See annex for the draft outline of the position paper

<sup>4</sup> Details available here: [Summit of the Future Two-Pager SOF 24Oct23 \(un.org\)](#)

## Annex A: Outline of the Position Paper

It is proposed the position paper will be structured as follows:

- Part 1 Presenting the framework
- Part 2 Presenting the use cases
  1. inclusion
  2. work and social security
  3. health

The outline of each part could be built on the proposed outline in the UNSC background report.

- a consistent and coherent generic framework and their applications (for the use cases of work and social security, health, and income, consumption, and wealth distributions) for measuring the impact of policy interventions and explaining the key trade-offs. This would present tables, matrices, and statistics across a spectrum of inclusive and sustainable well-being through the lenses of the “here and now”, elsewhere” and “future” drawing from the SNA, SPSS and SEEA,
- The principle subjective well-being (SWB core), presenting a clear headline narrative on overall well-being and the key components with accompanying distributional data pertaining to headline areas of policy.
- The principle objective measures of material well-being, drawn from the economic, environmental, and social domains and aligned with the subjective measures of wellbeing. This core set of objective indices would provide a clear perspective on headline areas of policy. These could be either individual indicators or composite indices, tailored to specific domains or in aggregate, developed using monetary and alternative weights to illustrate the trade-offs while simplifying the presentation of materials.
- Distributional data across geography and population groups and levels of deprivation, using either the individual or household as the unit of measurement to provide an equity and deprivation viewpoint.