

Local Councils, Progress & Wellbeing

Citizens' quality of life is crucial to a thriving community. Local governments around the world recognise this and many actively promote residents' wellbeing. Two initiatives, one from Australia and the other from Spain, are innovative examples of how wellbeing is being successfully incorporated. Australia's Sunshine Coast Council used existing research from the UK, showing how citizens can enhance their personal wellbeing, in the Healthy Communities Initiative program. The second example, from Spain, is a work-in-progress. A radical use of social media transformed council-resident interactions in a small town. With four years' experience under their collective belt, sufficient data is now available to evaluate the success of the Spanish program. These very different initiatives have a common strength: both are committed to using evidence and evaluating data to improve citizens' wellbeing.

Sunshine Coast Council (Australia): Five Ways to Wellbeing

[Sunshine Coast Council](#) in Australia sought to promote residents' quality of life. Using research from the New Economics Foundation, Council adopted the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) approach that advocates specific actions to improve wellbeing:

1. **Connect** - With the people around you. With family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.
2. **Be Active** – Go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.
3. **Take Notice** – Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.
4. **Keep Learning** – Try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for that course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.
5. **Give** – Do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you.

The Council's branded wellbeing program was 'Active, Healthy Sunshine Coast'. 'Every day, your way' was the tagline that reinforced the need for a personalised approach. Colourful, portable postcards, highlighting the Five Ways message using local citizens' experience, appealed to all age groups and were easily displayed in community venues.

Jun (Spain): Running a town on Twitter *

Jun (pronounced “*hoon*”), a town in southern Spain, has successfully experimented with social media-based communications between local citizens and their government. Many communications in Jun occur on Twitter. Launched by the local mayor in 2011, the system – a fast, efficient feedback loop – has reduced bureaucracy and been adopted as everyday practice.

Residents are encouraged to join the Twitter network, giving them a direct ‘line’ to the mayor, council employees, and fellow residents. Everyone has a ‘finger’ on the community’s pulse, and if an emergency occurs, swift action can be taken. For example, if a resident tweets that a street light is out, the mayor knows and responds quickly. This acknowledges the problem has been ‘heard’ and simultaneously alerts the local electrician (via Twitter) that the problem needs attention. The system works so well that most issues are fixed within 24 hours.

Benefits to the town and residents include saving time and money (no more missed return phone calls), citizens having a ‘voice’ on local matters even if they are not physically present at meetings, and publicising local social and cultural events. People keep up with one another, and appreciate the kudos that comes with neighbours knowing they are doing a good job in the town.

Evaluation of the Jun initiative is beginning, with investigation focusing on questions like whether public engagement has increased. It is apparent that Twitter has reshaped significant aspects of how Jun works. In the process, it is connecting community members, making democracy more transparent and participatory and, consequently, improving wellbeing.

In summary, the two case studies show that wellbeing, a measure of holistic quality of life, is a vital indicator of social progress. It needs to be emphasised, however, that before wellbeing is measured, its meaning needs to be *qualified* for the specific individuals or groups involved. The people whose experience is being researched are the ones who define what wellbeing means *for them in context*. Without establishing local meanings for experiences like wellbeing or progress, it’s likely that initiatives to improve either will miss the mark.

* Source: [The Incredible Jun: A Town that Runs on Social Media](#) By William Powers & Deb Roy

About the Author

Joanne Abbey PhD is Director/Organisational Psychologist with the [Centre for Corporate Wellbeing](#). Her research investigated the meaning and outcomes of wellbeing at work. Given that ‘culture is strategy’, organisational wellbeing is a significant driver of personal and operational performance. Follow her on twitter [@wellbeingsavvy](#).