



## A QUICK GUIDE

# Towards better social sector decision making and practice

## A social wellbeing approach

A social wellbeing approach takes knowledge produced from science and data and makes it useful by melding it with the lived experiences of real people to create new insights for better social sector decision making and practice.

It is about 'real people'  
– tamariki, rangatahi,  
whānau and communities  
– contributing to and  
benefitting from the  
work we do every day as  
researchers, data scientists,  
policy advisors or policy makers.



Meaningful engagement with whānau allows us to better understand lived experiences and share the wisdom of communities so others can benefit. We need both – what we can offer and the wisdom of communities. Here, The Southern Initiative and Social Wellbeing Agency show us how.

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## In a nutshell

In 2018 Auckland Council's The Southern Initiative (TSI)<sup>1</sup> and the Social Wellbeing Agency (the Agency)<sup>2</sup> joined forces to develop new ways of working to support improved social wellbeing and better social sector decision making and practice.

We tell our story of the 'Having a Baby in South Auckland' project (the Project) in a separate case study.<sup>3</sup> We hope this quick guide encourages researchers, data scientists, policy advisors and makers to apply the methodology and tools<sup>4</sup> developed in the Project in work you're doing to improve social wellbeing.

**This Project begins to shed light on what whānau, communities, service providers and social sector agencies can do to reduce prolonged cumulative stress and make life better for families around the birth of a child.**

## Background

An urgent need to better understand and respond to factors impacting child, youth and family wellbeing is stimulating government and community interest in innovative approaches to social sector decision making and practice.

TSI knew, from a review of the science on early childhood development and engaging with South Auckland whānau, that prolonged cumulative stress has significant adverse impacts on whānau wellbeing. Both TSI and the Agency wanted to better understand the impacts of prolonged cumulative stress on whānau and what families, communities and government could do about it.

Improving social wellbeing is about enabling people, whānau and communities to live the lives to which they aspire, including material conditions and quality of life. This promotes a strengths-based approach that recognises the connections people have to family, iwi, communities and regions. It uses various data (including administrative, survey and lived experiences), employs broad wellbeing measures and offers a range of support services. It is outcome-focused and seeks to make the best choices among possible interventions.

Whānau and community perspectives, because they are grounded in lived experiences, offer different ways of looking at and thinking about issues that can help government, non-governmental agencies (NGOs), communities and others to better understand complex problems and service delivery challenges. While data analytics can describe what has happened in certain areas of investigation, it does not necessarily explain why or how it happened.

**We approached this Project knowing that we make better use of data when we have a breadth of people making sense of it.**



## Co-design

In the early stages, TSI engaged with 12 whānau and 12 service providers in South Auckland, through café conversations and hui, to identify the topics most important to them around having a baby in South Auckland. Storytelling was used as the main means of collaborative inquiry to identify topics grounded in their lived experiences.

Together, TSI and the Agency sorted these topics into themes: a hard birth and a hard pregnancy; contraception and antidepressant use; relationship breakdown and the impact of blended families; safe or unsafe experiences; and, connection or isolation. These themes represented what whānau and service providers were most interested in and thought should be better understood, and were used to guide data selections.

The next step required analytics. Variables in data that might connect to the themes identified by whānau and service providers needed to be identified. These were used to build timelines of people's journeys from nine months before the birth through to six months after. The Agency's data scientists initially built individual timelines, helped by two university interns, then grouped similar timelines together to make representative timelines. By combining individual timelines together to make representative timelines, we protect individuals' privacy.

**Representative timelines allow us to focus on the whole journey of mums, dads, brothers, sisters and babies and look at multiple indications of resilience, stress, and unexpected intervention points around the time of having a baby. This helps us to see with more precision what is happening, when it is happening and for whom.**

The Agency's data scientists developed a visualisation tool, so the data could be presented in a pictorial way and be more easily understood by users. TSI specialists used this tool to make meaning of the data they found. They examined the representative timelines and considered what made sense and what didn't – and what questions we did or didn't need to ask whānau.

## Insights



### IDI data insights

We arrived at seven key insights about having a baby in South Auckland.

- 1. Fathers often stop earning money from paid work around the time baby is born**
- 2. Mothers are changing address while they are pregnant**
- 3. Mothers have a low rate of getting anti-depressant medicines**
- 4. Lots of mothers and fathers are enrolled in education while mum is pregnant**
- 5. There are worries about the safety of brothers and sisters**
- 6. Mothers experiencing a hard pregnancy have more tough things going on in their lives**
- 7. Some mothers are much less likely to get help from their midwife after baby is born**

### What whānau told us

We then engaged with whānau so they could see their own lived experiences in the data (or not) and share stories about what gives rise to the situations the data insights show.

There is a strong cultural norm and desire for fathers to be at home with mother and baby. Often fathers are employed in low-paid casual work, and feel quitting is the only option – because engaging with the ‘system’ is too hard.

Multiple, temporary moves during this time are common for mothers and siblings. Looking for short term accommodation is common as is planned moving between family members.

There are parents who want and need far more support for depression, but don’t receive it. Some mothers are concerned about the impact of drugs on baby.

Whānau say it’s easier to be in education than having to look for work. Often they’re also trying to build strengths and resilience and see education as a way to help them and their children have a better life long-term.

This is a really messy time for relationships – not just parent relationships. Mothers can take steps to ‘hide’ from services – not telling the truth about what is happening, avoiding home visits, not asking for help, or moving house.

Sometimes it’s too hard to even think about the baby until it comes because there are too many other ‘in your face’ demands – like having no money and trying to cope with the older kids. Once stress and exhaustion sets in it keeps on coming after baby is born.

Many whānau identified low contact with midwives as a sign of personal and cultural strength – they see it as “good and normal”. Mums think that high usage of midwifery services is a sign of social isolation.

You can read about these insights in greater detail in the separate case study.<sup>3</sup>

## What the Project delivered

- Demonstrated the significant potential of an innovative social wellbeing approach to produce new insights that can inform social sector decision making and practice.
- Illustrated co-design – the voices of South Auckland whānau guided what we did – from defining the original concept, what data we looked for, how we grouped the data, how we tested it and what meaning we made of it.
- Produced a reusable methodology and tools<sup>4</sup> others can apply to their projects using their data or, with access, to other Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI)<sup>5</sup> data sets.
- Produced robust insights on having a baby in South Auckland to guide further research and focus attention on specific policy areas aimed at improving social wellbeing.

## Promising potential

This Project shows how to go about delivering better social sector decision making. Increasing investment in this new approach could help New Zealand get to the nub of how to deliver better social support options for families, and improve social wellbeing.

*The Agency has already partnered with other providers and groups to apply the methodology and tools developed in the Project.*

**Whānau offered insights not voiced in TSI and Agency discussions on the data. Their ideas to help reduce prolonged cumulative stress around the birth of a baby included things whānau and communities can do and things government could do or do differently.**

## References

- 1 See: [tsi.nz](http://tsi.nz)
- 2 See: [swa.govt.nz](http://swa.govt.nz). Formerly, the Social Investment Agency
- 3 The Southern Initiative and Social Wellbeing Agency. (2020). *Towards better social sector decision making and practice: A social wellbeing approach*. Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: [sia.govt.nz](http://sia.govt.nz)
- 4 For research guidance, see: Social Investment Agency. (2019). *Representative timelines – modelling people’s life experiences: Analytic methodology*. Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: [sia.govt.nz](http://sia.govt.nz)  
For the assembly code go to the Agency’s GitHub page: [github.com/nz-social-wellbeing-agency/representative\\_timelines](https://github.com/nz-social-wellbeing-agency/representative_timelines).  
For the visualisation tool visit: [github.com/nz-social-wellbeing-agency/timeline\\_visualisation](https://github.com/nz-social-wellbeing-agency/timeline_visualisation)
- 5 In New Zealand, the IDI is a large collection of administrative government data for research purposes held by Stats NZ. See: [stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/integrated-data-infrastructure](http://stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/integrated-data-infrastructure).  
See also: Social Investment Agency. (2017). *Social Investment Agency’s Beginners’ Guide to the Integrated Data Infrastructure*. Wellington, New Zealand. Available at: [sia.govt.nz](http://sia.govt.nz)

## For more information

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