



The case for national children and young people's wellbeing measurement

The urgent need to address a growing crisis

The wellbeing of children and young people in the UK is at an all-time low. Recent data reveals that one in four children report low wellbeing, making the UK the lowest-ranked country in Europe. In 2022, 197,000 young people—the equivalent of the population of Milton Keynes—left secondary school with low levels of wellbeing¹. The number of children experiencing low wellbeing has been steadily rising over the last decade, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic but rooted in longer-term societal challenges.

Without urgent action, the consequences will be far-reaching: poorer educational outcomes, reduced productivity, higher healthcare costs, and increased demand for social services.

Why current understanding falls short

While some promotive factors - such as a positive school culture, supportive teachers, and strong family communication - are well-documented, the causes and prevalence of low wellbeing remain poorly understood. Known risk factors, such as bullying, loneliness, family challenges, lack of exercise, and difficult school environments, only explain part of the picture. As a result the Government may have some understanding of 'what' children and young people are doing in their day to day lives, but not about 'how' they feel, how these things are experienced, how they interact with one another, and how they impact the health, happiness and wellbeing of those young people.

The lack of robust and comprehensive data leaves policymakers, educators, and mental health practitioners with an incomplete understanding of what drives low wellbeing and how best to address it.

The case for national wellbeing measurement

National wellbeing measurement is a critical part of the solution. Without good measurement, it is difficult to know what needs to change and what works in bringing about change. A single, national, comprehensive dataset of children and young people's wellbeing, alongside a range of other indicators, would meet a wide range of policy needs, both locally and nationally. Many different Whitehall Departments, local decision makers and a wider group of stakeholders would stand to gain from better measurement.

¹ Pro Bono Economics, [Charting a happier course for England's Children: The case for universal wellbeing measurement](#), September 2024.

Regularly assessing children and young people’s wellbeing across England would:

- ➔ Provide vital data for better-targeted support.
- ➔ Enable evidence-based evaluations of what works to improve young lives.
- ➔ Highlight disparities and unmet needs, especially among vulnerable groups such as children with special educational needs (SEND) and care-experienced young people.
- ➔ Offer a consistent framework for comparing interventions at both local and national levels.

Measurement would also send a powerful signal that children and young people’s voices and experiences matter. By including children and young people in the process, we can ensure that solutions are informed by their perspectives.

A roadmap to implementation

The UK government must act now by establishing a cross-sector working group to guide the rollout of national wellbeing measurement for children and young people. This expert body would:



The cross-sector working group should be guided by 5 key principles:



1 - National Coverage

For the wellbeing measurement programme to be delivered nationally, capturing the voices and experience of young people in every part of England, with central accountability for managing the programme, developing national insights based on robust research to inform policymaking.



2 - Local Ownership

Local areas to determine aspects of the survey to meet local need and to facilitate local collaboration to respond to survey insights, bringing together young people, schools, local government, local healthcare systems and civil society.



3 - Youth Centred

To be genuinely youth-centred with young people involved in the working group, the survey design, rollout, oversight and accountability.



4 - Regular

The survey to be conducted on a regular basis (e.g. every year or every two years), to the benefit of young people, at a consistent time of the year that is deemed appropriate for young people.



5 - Confidentiality

Survey data to be transparent and made public at neighbourhood level. School-level data not made public to avoid crude league-tables and unfair school accountability. Appropriate controls in place to support insightful new research.

Why measurement matters

The saying goes, “What gets measured, matters.” Measuring children’s wellbeing will not only provide the insights needed to drive change but will also demonstrate a commitment to improving the lives of the next generation.

The government has a clear opportunity to lead the way in addressing this crisis. With the right tools, support, and collaboration, we can ensure that all children and young people in England have the chance to thrive now and in the future. The happiness and wellbeing of our children and young people must be a national priority.

Benefits of a national wellbeing measurement programme

To schools:

- Provide an in-depth understanding of a positive school approach and ethos to developing well-rounded, happy and healthy pupils. Compare support systems for students receiving Pupil Premium and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Provide robust mechanisms to evaluate holistic support by listening to pupils, moving away from subjective judgements on wellbeing interventions and support.
- Support children with low wellbeing at risk of mental health issues, exclusion, or poor academic performance.
- Build an evidence base to improve school transitions.

To children’s social care:

- Assess the effectiveness of services for looked-after children and those in need in promoting wellbeing.
- Provide in-depth understanding of issues that adversely impact children known to social care, enhancing identification of such challenges.
- Evaluate interventions to guide commissioning strategies.
- Potential to incorporate wellbeing insights and children’s voices into decision-making processes.

To health:

- Enhance understanding of the relation between wellbeing and health, particularly with regards to hidden emotional disorders.
- Gather evidence on effective strategies to improve the wellbeing and resilience of children and young people with mental health concerns.
- Enable professionals to understand young people’s emotional states for tailored support.
- Inform local public health strategies to enhance children’s mental and emotional health

Benefits of a national wellbeing measurement programme

To policing/safer streets:

- Inform early intervention and crime prevention activity by identifying societal pressures and concerns experienced by young people
- Shape and evaluate diversionary activity for young people to prevent involvement in criminal activity
- Monitor and support for young people who have been victims of crime
- Exploration of interconnecting factors that may increase a young person's vulnerability to crime
- Increase understanding of young people's perceptions of safety, informing local policing approaches

To economic growth:

- Assist the support provided to young people who are NEET, or at risk of becoming so
- Shift the link between health and work-readiness to an earlier intervention stage to detect challenges and identify solutions
- Provide rich insight into school and work readiness, including in-depth insight into transition periods in young people's lives
- Equip local leaders with demographic breakdowns to inform positive approaches to careers support and tackling economic inactivity

Supporters of the case for national children and young people's wellbeing measurement is available here: <https://www.ourwellbeingourvoice.org/about>

The full Pro Bono Economics report is available here: <https://www.ourwellbeingourvoice.org/get-involved>

