

Childhood in Essex

Evidence overview

March 2024



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What is it like being a child or young person in Essex today?

Why are we doing this work?

- We have a very good understanding of those children and young people who engage with statutory services.
- Discussions with partners suggested that the work of all agencies would benefit from a **deeper understanding of the realities of childhood for different groups and communities across the county** – whether they have a relationship with statutory services or not.
- The research work will **consolidate our existing data** and knowledge, and **address gaps identified as priorities**.
- This will be a strategic, **multi-disciplinary, multi-stage programme** of work.

The aim of the programme is to:

- develop a **holistic understanding of childhood and adolescence in Essex** – looking beyond those who are known to statutory services;
- better understand the experiences of children and young people across Essex's different cities, towns and villages, and across different groups and cohorts.

Overview

- This document gives an overview of current evidence on childhood and adolescence linking, where possible, specific evidence gathered from within Essex.
- The nature of a child's life is **complex and multiple factors contribute to the overall happiness and wellbeing**. They range from family dynamics and educational experiences to socio-economic conditions and personal health. These are interconnected, each playing a critical role in shaping the day-to-day experiences and prospects of young people.
- We have organized these factors into **seven domains of personal wellbeing**, informed by a wide-ranging review of the existing research literature (see References for sources).
- Evidence around each of these domains has been used to identify gaps in our understanding.

There is a mixed picture on the current state of children and young people's wellbeing.

- There is a **continued decline in young people's wellbeing over the past decade**. The current generation is growing up at a time of unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty, ranging from the continued recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, to deepening cost of living crisis, family poverty and international conflict.

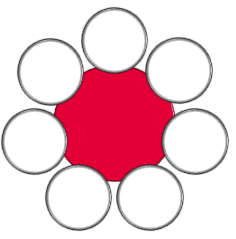


Domains of children and young people's wellbeing

- Multiple domains feed into the personal wellbeing of children and young people.
- **Seven main domains** that influence general wellbeing have been identified, each encompassing its own sub-domains.
- While available national data allows for some correlations to be identified between the various factors that sit across these domains, **the complexity of the relationships between them does not allow us to determine straight-forward and generalisable causal relationships.**
- Individual domains are explored in greater detail on the following slides.



CYP personal wellbeing



Wellbeing amongst CYP has been declining over the past ten years. Measures of wellbeing show sharp declines as CYP move from primary to secondary school and progress through their teenage years. Girls have lower levels of wellbeing across most areas.

Personal wellbeing is not a single measure but is influenced by a combination of ‘areas of life’.

- For example, satisfaction with life, feelings of happiness and life being worthwhile, satisfaction with family, friends, school, home, health, appearance and spending time. All these fall into the domains which are explored further within this document.

CYP’s wellbeing has continued to decline over the last decade.

- 1 in 10 CYP had low wellbeing and nearly 3 in 10 CYP (aged 10 to 17) were unhappy with at least one area of their lives (Children’s Society, 2023).

Gender and age are key indicators of personal wellbeing.

- Personal wellbeing drops as CYP move from primary into secondary school and continues to drop further as they move through secondary school.
- Boys generally have higher wellbeing scores than girls. Girls remain significantly less happy with their appearance than boys.
- Satisfaction with specific areas of life, especially school, decreases with age. Low wellbeing is the highest at age 15.
- In addition, some evidence shows that CYP from White backgrounds tend to have lower wellbeing scores than CYP from ‘all other’ ethnic backgrounds.

Nationally, young people tend to be most happy with their ‘family’, ‘health’ and ‘home’.

- Lowest levels of happiness were reported for ‘future’, ‘school’ and ‘appearance’.
- After controlling for gender and age, ‘appearance’ and ‘family’ appear to be the most important for happiness with life as a whole (Children’s Society, 2022, 2023).

Essex insight:

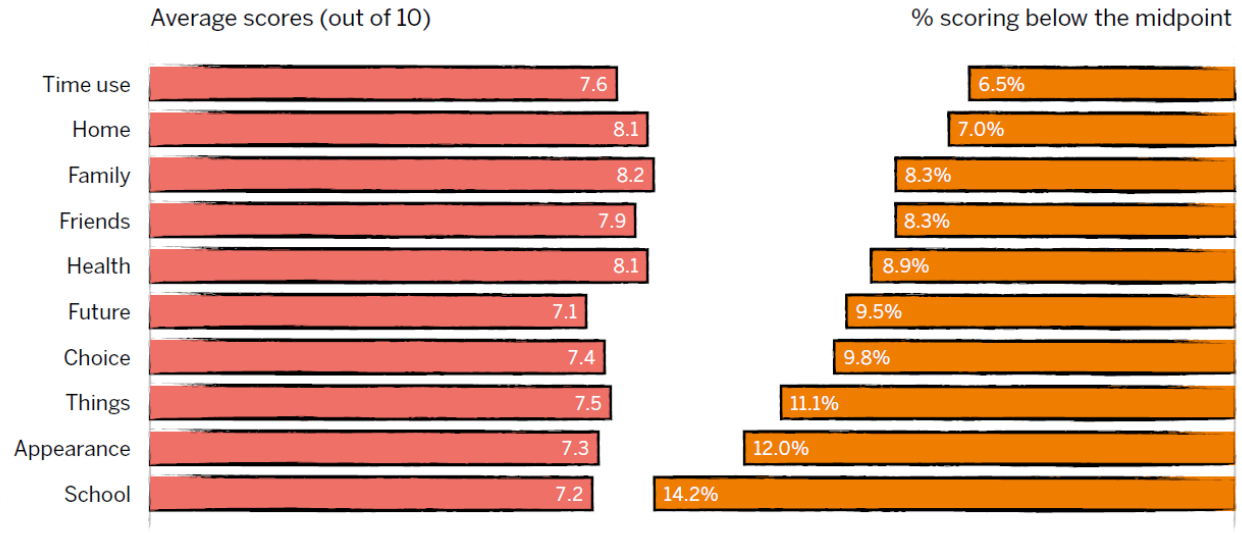
- Wellbeing scores for Essex pupils are broadly in line with national. From Year 7 onwards girls report lower rates of wellbeing than boys. Gender-diverse pupils report vastly lower rates of wellbeing.
- There were no differences in wellbeing reported across ethnic groups. While schools with higher levels of Free School Meal eligibility tend to have slightly lower levels of wellbeing.
- Gender-diverse pupils report vastly lower rates of wellbeing.
- Yet, Essex pupils report considerably lower wellbeing relating to their appearance (26.7% in Essex, 11.7% nationally), and feel less happy about how they use their time (16.7% in Essex, 6.1% nationally) (Cruikshanks, 2022).
- Additional source of information: Essex Schools Health and Wellbeing survey 2007-2019.

The Good Childhood Report

2022



Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index

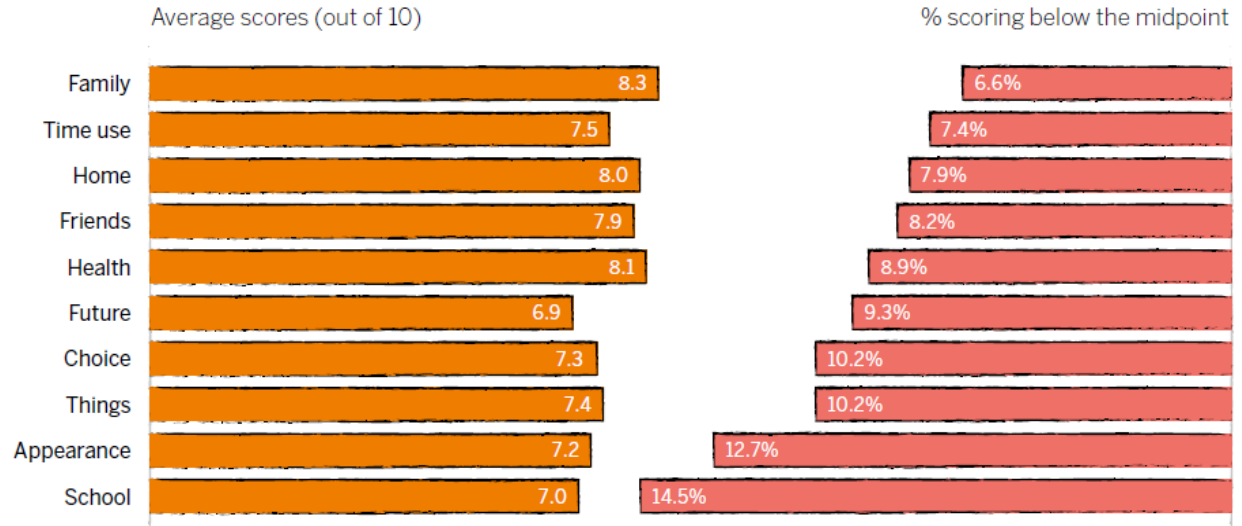


Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 21, May to June 2022, 10- to 17-year-olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data. Excludes missing responses (including 'prefer not to say').

2023



Latest figures from the Good Childhood Index for children (aged 10 to 17).



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data. Excludes missing responses (including 'prefer not to say').

Nearly 1/3 of children (aged 10 to 17) expressed dissatisfaction with at least one of the ten specific areas of their lives.

Results between 2022 and 2023 are almost identical.

Least happy (lowest average scores) with:

- Future
- School
- Appearance

% scoring below the midpoint:

- School
- Appearance
- Things
- Boys tend to be happier than girls (boys have higher mean scores across all ten items).
- Girls remain significantly less happy with their appearance than boys.
- Children's relationships with their family and friends are important for their wellbeing.

Source: Children's Society (2022, 2023)

Biggest issues facing young people today

Essex Youth Service Survey 2018-19 (17,000 respondents)	Essex Youth Service Survey 2022 (2,000 respondents)	Essex Youth Service Survey 2022 <i>Which issues would you like more information and support with?</i>	The Big Ask 2022 – Essex respondents (Children’s Commissioner) (8,500 Essex respondents)	Make Your Mark 2022 – Essex respondents (UK Youth Parliament) (over 20,000 Essex respondents)	Make Your Mark 2022 (UK Youth Parliament) (over 430,000 respondents) (latest data)
Stress (57%)	Mental health and wellbeing (77%)	Mental health and wellbeing (39%)	Mental health (21%)	Jobs, money, homes and opportunities (23%)	Health and wellbeing (21%)
Depression (49%)	Bullying (51%)	Managing money (25%)	The choice of things to do in my local area (18%)	Health and wellbeing (21%)	Jobs, money, homes and opportunities (19%)
Bullying (49%)	Low confidence (49%)	Making life choices (24%)	Life at school/college (15%)	Environment (16%)	Education and learning (18%)
Anxiety (48%)	Drugs/alcohol/smoking (47%)	Low confidence (23%)	Physical health (12%)	Education and learning (14%)	Environment (17%)
Low confidence & Relationships with parents/carers (34% each)	Hate crime (e.g. due to race, religion, disability, LGBTQ+) (44%)	Feeling lonely (18%)	Progress in education (11%) <i>*Respondents stating how unhappy they are with their current lives in these areas</i>		Poverty (12%)

Key findings from across the domains

Health: Mental & Emotional

Significant post-pandemic rise in mental health issues, particularly among young women and girls. Experiences of anxiety, stress and depression are fuelled by academic pressure, social media, concerns about personal appearance and bullying.

Health: Physical

Slight dips in activity during the Covid-19 pandemic have recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Active play and informal activity are most common for primary aged children, while team sports are the most common for secondary aged pupils.

Education | Skills | Aspiration

Children's happiness with school has declined since 2015-2016 - exacerbated by the pandemic's disruption of education. Happiness in school declines with age and is lower among children from lower-income households, with long-term health issues/disabilities, and amongst girls.

Relationships

The quality of CYP's relationships with their family, peers, and other trusted adults, is fundamental to wellbeing. While family relationships are key to establishing good levels of wellbeing, friendships become increasingly important and influential as CYP get older.

Socio-economics

Children's experiences of financial pressures, perceptions of family wealth and material resources affect their happiness – poverty needs to be addressed to improve wellbeing. Lower family income is associated with worse CYP wellbeing and self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. Happiness with school, and educational attainment, is lower among CYP from lower income HHs.

Environment & Safety

Majority of YP tend to feel safe and like living in their neighbourhood and can trust local people. Yet, this varies considerably between different locations, and between daytime and after dark. For some, safety concerns pose a barrier to doing more in their free time.

Activities and use of time

Most CYP tend to spend their free time with friends and family, followed by sports, creative activities, gaming and going to towns, cinemas and arcades. Not all CYP feel there is enough to do locally. Main barriers include lack of time, lack of money, accessibility or safety concerns. Disparities exist based on family income, ethnicity, and ability levels of CYP.

Social media

Internet is embedded in young people's lives. Yet, social media represents a double-edged sword, offering educational and social benefits but also exposing young individuals to negative interactions and unrealistic standards, particularly affecting girls. Young people need guidance on navigating social media, protecting their privacy, and recognizing harmful content.

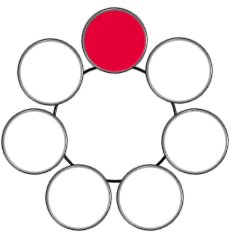
Society and future

CYP value being heard and show mixed feelings about the future. They are most worried about 'rising prices', 'environment' and 'crime'. While most feel positive about their own future, they are sceptical about the future of the country or the world.

Domains – summary findings

1. Health – mental and emotional;
physical
2. Education, skills and aspirations
3. Relationships
4. Socio-economic circumstances
5. Environment and safety
6. Activities and time use
7. Society and future

Health: Mental and emotional



Significant post-pandemic rise in mental health issues, particularly among young women and girls. Experiences of anxiety, stress and depression are fuelled by academic pressure, social media, concerns about personal appearance and bullying.

At least half of adult mental health conditions are established by adolescence.

There is an increase in diagnosable mental illness among young people nationally, especially post-pandemic:

- Between 1999 and 2017, the prevalence of diagnosable mental health increased from approximately 1 in 10 to 1 in 9 CYP. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, this sharply increased to 1 in 6 (NHS England, 2023).
- In 2023, about 1 in 5 CYP (8-25 years) had a probable mental health disorder.
- Among 8 to 16-year-olds, rates are similar across genders, but among 17-25 year olds, rates for young women are twice as high as for young men.
- CYP from minority ethnic groups tend to show a lower rate of probable MH disorders.

Young people's experience of anxiety, stress and depression is fuelled by academic pressure (such as exam stress and homework), social media, their views on their appearance, experiences of bullying and others.

- CYP want to be accepted for who they are and be able to 'be themselves' without judgement.
- Self-esteem falls particularly when moving to secondary school, due to increased concerns about being judged and not fitting in. As YP get older, how they see and value themselves becomes more closely tied to how they feel about their lives generally, of concern particularly for girls. Between ages 8 and 14, girls' confidence levels drop by 30% (Ypulse, 2018).
- Girls experience lower wellbeing, lower self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. Many feel anxious and worried and under pressure due to online harm, their appearance and sexual harassment. Appearance is of particular concern, with many feeling ashamed of how they look, striving to meet unrealistic expectations viewed online. 17-19 year old women are more likely to have a possible eating disorder.

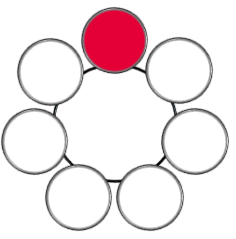
Stigma around mental health is felt, and support in schools is not always seen as sufficient.

- Teacher survey findings concur that teachers don't always feel equipped to deal with YP's MH issues. Evidence calls for greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

Essex insight:

- Essex CYP have identified mental health and wellbeing as the biggest issues facing them. They also call for more information and support with mental health and wellbeing (Essex Youth Service, 2019, 2022).
- Anxiety and bullying brought up in discussions held by the Multi-schools Council (MSC, 2022a). Anxiety levels higher among SEND children, who feel they are not understood or their needs are not met. MSC has developed Resilience and self-esteem course materials for schools. Mental health and ADHD voted as focus areas by MSC from September 2024.
- Concerns around mental health of CYP are repeatedly mentioned by Essex professionals.

Health: Physical



Slight dips in activity during the Covid-19 pandemic have recovered to pre-pandemic levels. Active play and informal activity are most common for primary aged children, while team sports are the most common for secondary aged pupils.

Just under half of CYP (47%, 3.5 million) are 'active', doing 60 minutes or more physical activity each day (Sport England, 2023).

- Activity levels are lowest for those in Years 3-4 (age 7-9).
- Those from the least affluent families, those from Asian and Black ethnicities are the least likely to be active.
- CYP with a disability or long-term health condition are slightly more likely to be active than those without one.
- Boys are more likely to be active than girls.

There's a positive association between levels of engagement in sport and physical activity and levels of mental wellbeing and levels of individual and community development. Active CYP tend to be less lonely.

- Engaging in physical activity is particularly important for early adolescent boys' mental health. Girls are less keen to participate in certain activities, as they feel that boys tend to be too competitive.
- Physically literate children and young people are happier, more likely to keep trying until they can do something and more likely to trust others of a similar age to themselves.

As CYP get older, the activities participated in change.

- Active play, team sports and active travel are the most common. While active play and informal activity are most common for primary aged children, team sports are the most common for secondary aged pupils.

Rates of obesity are consistently higher for year 6 age children vs. reception.

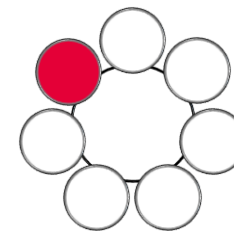
- Rates remain higher than before the pandemic (DfE, 2023a). Being overweight in childhood is associated with worse mental health outcomes for both genders, having a lasting impact on negative body image.

Sleep problems were more prevalent in older children and young people, specifically young women (NHS England, 2023), groups particularly at risk for poorer mental health and wellbeing in general.

Essex insight:

- 'Sport opportunities for all' voted as one of the three focus areas by Multi-Schools council in 2020.
- Motivation and enjoyment of sport can be very low among older girls. Feeling self-conscious, fearing being judged and lacking confidence are the key barriers for participation. Girls especially tended not to enjoy PE at school, and competitive sports played with boys. Preferring single gender groups for PE (R&CI, 2023).
- Sports are among the main ways CYP in Essex spend their free time (Essex Youth Service, 2019, 2022)

Education, skills and aspirations



Children's happiness with school has declined since 2015-2016 - exacerbated by the pandemic's disruption of education. Happiness in school declines with age and is lower among children from lower-income households, with long-term health issues/disabilities, and amongst girls.

There is a strong relationship between school belonging and CYP wellbeing.

- School culture, relationships with staff and peers, the curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities and the actual physical environment all play a role in CYP's experience at school.
- CYP that 'feel listened to' at school are more likely to report being happy with their sense of safety, school facilities, the things they learned in lessons, and schoolwork. Yet, many report not being listened to or that they are unable to participate in decision making at school (Children's Society, 2022).

Primary school children are generally happier compared to those in secondary schools.

- Older students show declining happiness concerning schoolwork, more notable for boys. Though, generally boys tend to be happier than girls with various elements of their school life. CYP in KS2 and KS5 were happier than those at KS3 and KS4.

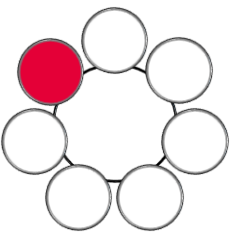
The most common causes of worry or anxiety for CYP tend to be school-related.

- Getting good grades in exams, schoolwork and applying for next stage of education were highest for Years 12-13 and lowest for Years 7-9. Compared to other European countries, British students experience a high fear of failure and high levels of schoolwork pressure (PISA 2018, in Children's Society, 2022).
- Concerns over other pupils' behaviour and bullying were highest for Years 7-9 and lowest for Years 12-13. Secondary school white pupils report greater anxiety, less motivation to learn and concentrate at school, compared to those from a minority ethnic background.
- Bullying undermines CYP's wellbeing and is one of the key reasons for school absence. Although frequency decreases with age, around 1 in 4 CYP are frequently bullied (Smith, 2022). Pupils with SEND, eligible for FSM, those with a probable mental disorder are significantly more likely to be bullied. Evidence shows that interventions which create understanding of and accountability for harm caused by bullying are more effective than punitive action.

Essex insight:

- Attainment levels and other data are available internally through the Education Performance and Intelligence Team.
- The series of lockdowns and school closures resulted in isolation of young people from their peers and the usual school environment, coupled with concerns about the impact on their education, exams and subsequent education/career path, many feeling automatically disadvantaged (R&CI, 2022a).
- Essex Schools Health and Wellbeing survey 2007-2019.

Education, skills and aspirations (Cont.)



Children's happiness with school has declined since 2015-2016 - exacerbated by the pandemic's disruption of education. Happiness in school declines with age and is lower among children from lower-income households, with long-term health issues/disabilities, and amongst girls.

Family's income impacts CYP's happiness with school.

- Around a third of parents struggle with school costs such as trips, uniform and shoes. Lack of material possessions can be a cause of bullying (Children's Society, 2022).

Performance assessments can be socially stigmatising.

- Being placed in 'low performance' streams in primary school can have a socially stigmatising effect on CYP, specifically having a negative impact on the self-esteem of boys at the age of 14 (Crenna-Jennings, 2021).

Most young people naturally have high aspirations.

- Aspirations are not dependant on socio-economic background. Aspirations start to form early in life, but they change over time, often becoming more specific and limited as people get older.
- Aspirations then become more 'expectations' which tend to be lower amongst disadvantaged young people with large gaps emerging between aspirations and expectations.
- YP and their parents generally do not have a firm understanding of the steps they need to take to achieve these aspirations, which may not be realised as a result (R&CI, 2022b).
- Girls' aspirations over the last 15 years have changed, with more value now placed on owning their own house, rather than being married. Yet, girls' lower self-esteem can have a negative impact on their prospects: 48% of girls aged 11-16 think it will be harder to get a job when they leave education than it was for young people 5 years ago (Girlguiding, 2023).

Research shows that unfair treatment of individuals based on their class, race, gender, disadvantage or SEND continues across the society.

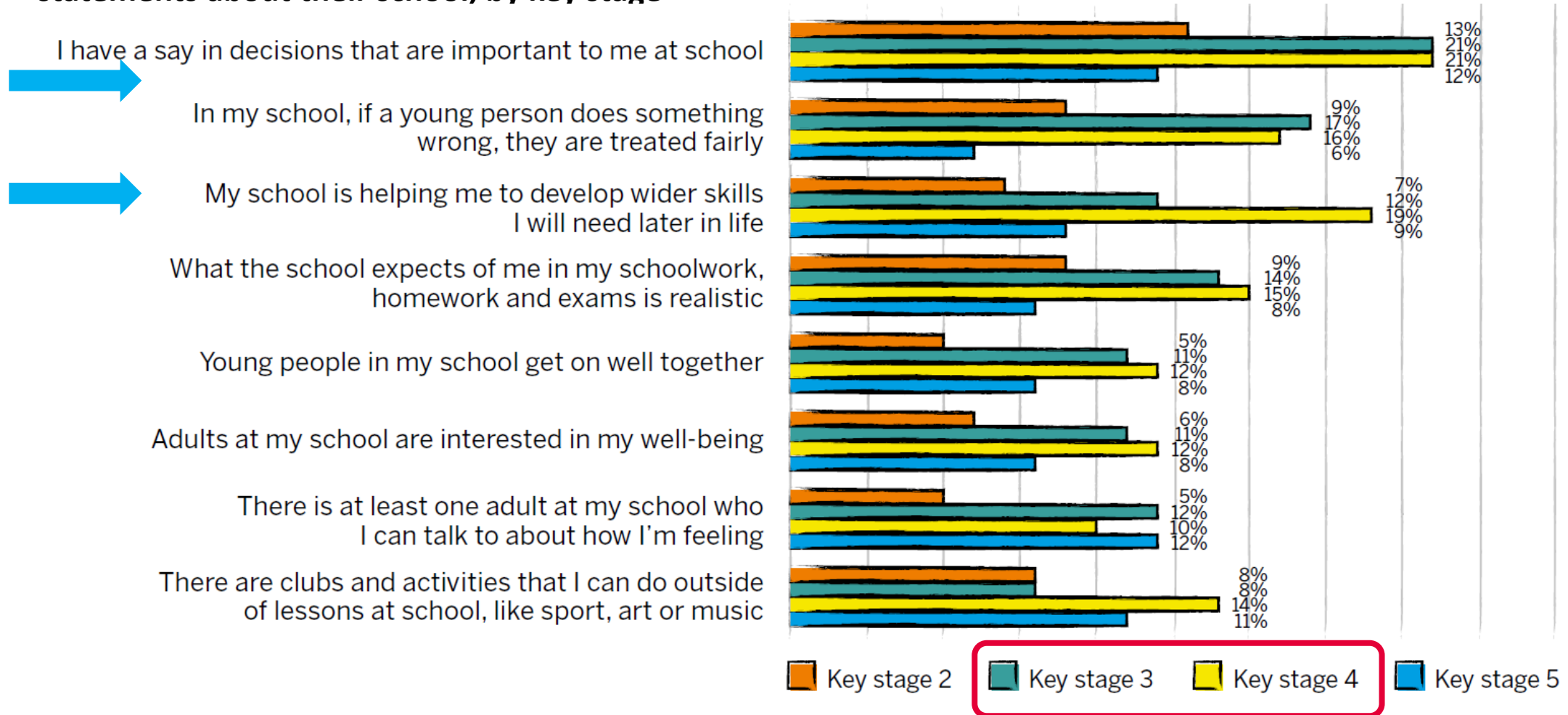
- In schools, this may include differential treatment of certain pupils, low educational expectations, lack of awareness of diversity, or diverse responses to behavioural issues. There are concerns over the comfort of CYP openly expressing their identities within schools, including those identifying as LGBTQ+. Black Caribbean boys face a higher likelihood of school exclusions.

Essex insight:

- Bullying tends to be the main reason for school absences, especially for SEND children (MSC).
- Post-Covid, YP reported 'not being successful' as their overall fear – referring to exam results and potential negative impact on their future prospects. Many felt negative about future opportunities for YP (R&CI, 2022a).
- Aspirations of Essex YP with SEND are the same as those of CYP without SEND – to be happy, have a family, job and live independently (PTO, 2016).

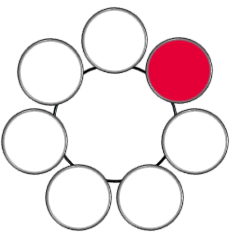
Role of school in CYP's wellbeing

Good Childhood Report (Children's Society, 2022): Proportion of children who disagreed with eight statements about their school, by key stage



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 21, May-June 2022, 10- to 17-year-olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data. Excludes missing responses (including 'Don't know').

Relationships



The quality of CYP's relationships with their family, peers, and other trusted adults, is fundamental to wellbeing. While family relationships are key to establishing good levels of wellbeing, friendships become increasingly important and influential as CYP get older.

Family relationships tend to be placed above anything else for young people.

- With overwhelmingly positive associations, including love, safety, security and support.
- Children that are unhappy with their family and with their health have the strongest associations with being unhappy with their life as a whole.
- CYP value trust in relationships, emphasizing the importance of having reliable and understanding figures in their lives. Acceptance and understanding within families, alongside quality time, stable daily routines and parental attention, are crucial.
- The percentages of those reporting low happiness with their family has increased from 3.7% in 2019 to 8.3% in 2022, with a slight recovery (6.6%) in 2023 (DfE, 2023a).

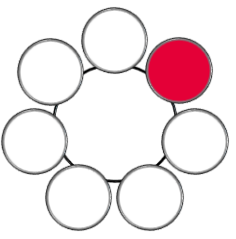
Families facing wider challenges are more likely to struggle supporting good wellbeing for CYP.

- Families facing mental health issues, living in dysfunctional or insecure environments, or in financial hardship, struggle with promoting well-being.
- While most parents want to be the best they can be for their children, they often face challenges with parenting itself and seeking support. There is often lack of clear understanding of what is required at each stage of child development.
- Many face isolation and lack of support networks. Frequent arguing with parents and poor maternal health especially have negative impacts.

Essex insight:

- Spending time with family and friends was mentioned as their main free time activity by more than two thirds of CYP (followed by social media) (Essex Youth Service, 2019, 2022).
- The main positive of the Covid-19 pandemic for many YP was realising the importance of the family, spending more quality time with family and growing closer to them (R&CI, 2022a).

Relationships (Cont.)



The quality of CYP's relationships with their family, peers, and other trusted adults, is fundamental to wellbeing. While family relationships are key to establishing good levels of wellbeing, friendships become increasingly important and influential as CYP get older.

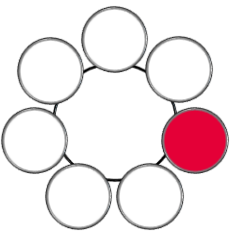
Reliance on relationships outside of the family increases with age.

- Support from friends is sometimes preferred over support from parents. For example, confiding in someone of their own age. Yet, CYP welcome support from trusted adults on how to build and nurture good friendships.
- Having parents and friends who can be confided in about worries and concerns is important for all CYP.
- A positive peer environment is key, as adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer influence. Being able to 'be yourself' around friends is crucial.
- Belonging to a peer group boosts feelings of inclusion and confidence, helping to combat loneliness and can protect against negative effects such as peer victimisation and internalising behaviours.
- But peer group norms and the desire to fit in with others can also be damaging to CYP self-esteem.
- Year 7 can generally be a challenging year for CYP, as they transition to secondary school and forge new friendships.
- For CYP with disabilities, the ability to have satisfying relationships outside of the family is a key aspiration.
- 5.7% reported low happiness with friends in 2019, which increased to 8.3% in 2022, with a slight drop to 8.2% in 2023 (DfE, 2023a).

Essex insight:

- During the pandemic period, many CYP reported realising who their 'real friends' were and learnt to value these friendships more. Friendship groups tended to change for all age groups over time.
- The inability to socialise face to face and being 'stuck at home' during the Covid-19 pandemic made YP feel lonely, bored and unmotivated, sometimes resulting in decreased confidence and feeling more self-conscious. YP welcomed their return to school after the pandemic, particularly seeing their friends and socialising again, but some found this difficult (R&CI, 2022a).

Socio-economic circumstances



Children's experiences of financial pressures, perceptions of family wealth and material resources affect their happiness – poverty needs to be addressed to improve wellbeing. Lower family income is associated with worse CYP wellbeing and self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. Happiness with school, and educational attainment, is lower among CYP from lower income households.

The socio-economic environment into which children are born and grow up in is crucial for their psychological and emotional development.

- While not an absolute determinant of outcomes, the community and economy of a place still profoundly shape experience, expectation and opportunity.

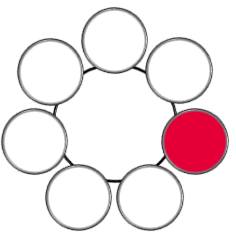
The cost-of-living crisis risks pushing more children and families into financial insecurity, which can subsequently impact ability to engage in wellbeing activities for CYP.

- Prior to the cost-of-living crisis, 1 in 3 children were already living in poverty. This was 4.2 million children in 2021-22. Wages not increasing with inflation would likely result in further 500,000 children being pushed into poverty (Children's Society, 2022d).
- In 2023, over 82% of parents/carers were 'very' or 'quite' concerned about the cost of living increases on their family/household over the next 12 months (compared to 85% in 2022). 41% were 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright' on their household income, yet the rest found it difficult or were just about getting by (Children's Society, 2023).
- CYP acknowledge the importance of family finances in meeting basic needs and fostering a sense of social inclusion. Lack of money can result in CYP missing out on things that most other children enjoy, such as activities, family holidays and other opportunities. CYP happiness with the things they have (like money and the things they own) has remained stable in recent years, on average. CYP's perception of their circumstances relative to their peers plays a role, too.

Essex insight:

- Lived experience of Essex families around their socio-economic circumstances have been extensively researched in the 'Early Years Ethnographies' (ESRO and TPO, 2014), 'Just about managing' families (BritainThinks and ECC, 2000) and Parenting in Essex (Revealing Reality, 2023) projects, yielding consistent findings.
- Ensuring that children have a fulfilling and enjoyable upbringing is the priority for JAM families, trying their best to isolate their children from the worst effects of their financial situation.

Socio-economic circumstances (Cont.)



Children's experiences of financial pressures, perceptions of family wealth and material resources affect their happiness – poverty needs to be addressed to improve wellbeing. Lower family income is associated with worse CYP wellbeing and self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. Happiness with school, and educational attainment, is lower among CYP from lower income households.

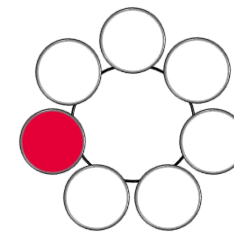
Lower family income is associated with worse CYP wellbeing and self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress.

- CYP 'often' or 'always' worrying about how much money their family has is associated with lower wellbeing. CYP themselves are aware that lack of finances puts a pressure on the whole family.
- Happiness with school is significantly lower among CYP from lower income households. Around a third of parents and carers reported struggling with the cost of school trips, school uniform, and school shoes. Lack of material possessions may be a potential reason for bullying (Children's Society, 2022).
- CYP from income-deprived households (FSM eligible) have lower average earnings than their peers, even when they achieve the same qualifications. The persistent earnings gap is mostly due to FSM eligible young people less likely going to university. Food insecurity increases mental and physical health risks and affects educational and lifetime attainment (ONS, 2022; Hartgen-Walker and Lally, 2023).
- Some of the important features of a 'happy home' listed by CYP include: a positive, safe and clean environment without conflict, where parents/carers are not abusive and nurture and look after children (ONS, 2020).

Essex insight:

- All 'Just About Managing' families are in an uncertain financial situation month-to-month, with limited resilience for dealing with the unexpected.
- Ability to plan for the future relies on feeling stable and in control in the present.
- Life for JAM families is extremely busy, meaning there is limited mental 'bandwidth' for anything beyond the day-to-day.
- Sharing the load is key to coping; JAM families tend to have a network of people they can call on for support (BritainThinks and ECC, 2020).

Environment and safety



Majority of YP tend to feel safe and like living in their neighbourhood and can trust local people. Yet, this varies considerably between different locations, and between daytime and after dark. For some, safety concerns pose a barrier to doing more in their free time.

Feeling safe is a crucial component of children's happiness.

- This includes having safe places to socialize with friends and a sense of security at home, in their neighbourhoods, at school, and online. CYP expressed a need for safe, well-maintained spaces and improved access to leisure facilities, transportation, and affordability (ONS, 2020).
- Most CYP feel safe in their neighbourhood (83.8%), liked living in their neighbourhood (83.9%), could trust people in their neighbourhood (73.2%), and reported there being enough places to play in their neighbourhood (69.8%) (DfE, 2023a).
- However, almost 8% did not feel safe in their neighbourhood, 8% did not like living in their neighbourhood. Almost half worried about being a victim of crime and felt unsafe walking alone in their area after dark.

Girls generally feel less safe, be it outside, at school or online.

- They often face toxic comments from boys that leave them feeling uncomfortable or fearful. This includes experiences of threatening or upsetting behaviour online (Girlguiding, 2023).
- ONS is currently conducting the Young People's Safety Survey, which investigates young people's experiences and attitudes related to safety both online and in their daily lives.
- It is recommended that local authorities collaborate with girls and other vulnerable groups to develop solutions aimed at enhancing young people's sense of safety in their communities, particularly during nighttime.

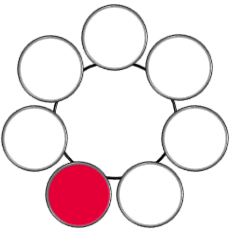
CYP sometimes feel that that their local areas lack places and activities for CYP.

- Along with lack of perceived safety or the need for improvements to make local areas more child-friendly. CYP are seeking both indoor and outdoor spaces, which are safe, clean, warm, with an accepting atmosphere. 'The choice of things to do in my local area' was the second area CYP in Essex were the most unhappy with (Children's Commissioner, 2021).

Essex insight:

- More than 2 in 3 Essex CYP feel safe (67%), but they also avoid going out after dark or avoid specific areas. Feelings of safety when out with friends locally vary between Essex districts. For example, YP feel very safe in Uttlesford, but not in Harlow (ECVYS and VVU, 2023).
- YP are worried about places with poor lighting, including streets and parks at night and public transport. YP would feel safer with more police presence, better street lighting and CCTV/security, more places for YP to go and more trusted adults being around.
- They would like to receive more education and self-defence skills on how to stay safe, harsher punishments for anti-social behaviour, and more opportunities for young people to get involved in positive activities.
- 28% felt 'very safe' and 59% felt 'somewhat safe' (Essex Youth Service, 2022).
- 'Crime' voted as key focus area by Multi-schools Council from September 2024 onwards.
- Within Essex, 88.5% of all community violence was attributable to 10% of all suspects, equating to about 2,000 individuals, who were predominantly males aged 14-22 years. More than half of these were victims of community violence themselves and almost one third have been exposed to domestic abuse (VVU, 2024).
- Essex Police records show that in 2020, 4% of Greater Essex CYP aged 11-19 years had been a victim of violent offence, and 3% had been a suspect in a violent offence (R&CI, 2020).
- Risk Avert programme – delivered in schools to Y8 pupils.

Activities and time of use



Most CYP tend to spend their free time with friends and family, followed by sports, creative activities, gaming and going to towns, cinemas and arcades. Not all CYP feel there is enough to do locally. Main barriers include lack of time, lack of money, accessibility or safety concerns. Disparities exist based on family income, ethnicity, and ability levels of CYP.

Safety, access to nature, and engagement in extracurricular activities are all important influencers on how CYP spend their time.

- Between 2021 and 2023, CYP happiness with their time usage remained relatively stable, with a slight dip during the Covid-19 pandemic, but some recovery post-2020 (DfE, 2023a). However, Essex pupils appear less happy about how they spend their time, compared to national (Cruikshanks, 2022).

Spending time doing what they enjoy enables CYP to ‘relax and de-stress’.

- Apart from spending time with family and friends, popular activities include sports (inside and outside of school), creative activities (art, drama, music), gaming and going to towns, cinemas and arcades.
- During autumn 2021, almost 9 out of 10 children and young people reported spending time outside at school regularly, while 56% reported spending time in a private or shared garden space.
- In 2021/22, most CYP (83%) engaged in at least one extra-curricular activity. While appreciating the availability of extra-curricular activities at school, some feel pressured to join school clubs. More females than males reported not attending extracurricular activities (DfE, 2023a).
- CYP seek variety (vs. CYP mentioning the lack of things to do locally), affordability, proximity to home and time – one barrier being potentially too much homework and thus less free time to pursue other activities and interests. CYP need safe spaces, where they feel welcome and where they can be themselves, and with trusted adults around (ONS, 2020).

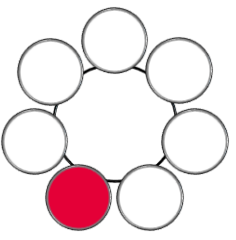
There are disparities noted based on family income, ethnicity, and ability levels of CYP.

- Children from households with over £50,000 annual income were more likely to spend time outside at school and feel connected to nature than those from households earning under £15,000. Higher-income families also showed higher levels of physical activity and higher connection to nature (DfE, 2023a).
- White children are more likely to spend time outside at school than black or black British and Asian or Asian British children. Similarly, those without disabilities were more engaged in outdoor activities at school compared to those with disabilities. This highlights inequalities in access.

Essex insight:

- CYP most frequent leisure activities include spending time with family and friends, social media, sport and exercise, gaming and ‘hanging out in town’.
- The key barriers to doing more in their free time were ‘not enough time’, ‘not enough money’ and ‘not feeling safe’ (Essex Youth Service, 2019, 2022).
- In Essex, children and young people express a desire for more accessible and affordable sports and youth clubs, along with welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces for relaxation and socializing (ECVYS and VVU, 2023).
- Essex pupils feel less happy about how they use their time (16.7% in Essex, 6.1% nationally) (Cruikshanks, 2022).

Activities and time of use: Social media



Internet is now firmly embedded in young people's lives. Yet, social media represents a double-edged sword, offering educational and social benefits but also exposing young individuals to negative interactions and unrealistic standards, particularly affecting girls. Young people need guidance on navigating social media, protecting their privacy, and recognizing harmful content.

Social media is a key influencer for CYP and holds both advantages and potential negative impacts for users.

- Advantages of using social media for young people include its utility for learning and communication, self-expression and creativity, as well as a sense of necessity stemming from fear of missing out.
- However, concerns arise regarding unsafe usage, cyberbullying and harassment, inappropriate content exposure, privacy concerns, and the presentation of unrealistic images, leading to lowered well-being due to social comparisons, especially for girls. The pervasive nature of online presence exposes individuals to a wide range of opinions and judgments .

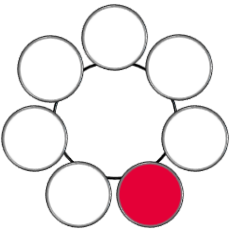
Regardless of a young person's pre-existing emotional health status, heavy social media use and low levels of physical activity are linked to worse wellbeing and self-esteem as young people get older.

- 62.8% of 11- to 16-year-olds and 65.9% of 17- to 24-year-olds agreed that they feel safe using social media. 12.6% of 11- to 16-year-olds and 15.3% of 17- to 24-year-olds agreed that they have been bullied online (DfE, 2023a).
- Girls and young women were less likely than boys and young men to report that they feel safe using social media. Young women were more likely than young men to report that they have been bullied online.
- Particularly girls face increased negative behaviour online, with a significant rise in threatening or sexist comments. Ensuring reports are taken seriously and harmful content is removed is crucial for their safety. 62% of girls and young women aged 7-21 have been criticised or had mean things said about how they look compared to 49% in 2016, linking with their ever-decreasing satisfaction with their appearance (Girlguiding, 2023).
- YP are reluctant to involve adults in their online lives, for the fear of parents/teachers overreacting or misunderstanding what YP consider 'normal' online behaviour.
- There are indications that girls and boys perceive social media content differently. While girls may strive to meet an unrealistic body image, boys view this content as more aspirational.

Essex insight:

- More than half of Essex CYP choose to spend their free time on social media (Essex Youth Service, 2019, 2022).
- During the Covid-19 pandemic. Mobile phones, technology and social media played an important role in being able to stay connected with others and acted as entertainment or a coping mechanism.
- The importance subsided once young people returned to school.
- Some young people have become more aware of the negative impacts of social media and suggested that parents/carers should have more interest in YP's online activities. (R&CI, 2022a).

Society and future



CYP value being heard and show mixed feelings about the future. They are most worried about ‘rising prices’, ‘environment’ and ‘crime’. While most feel positive about their own future, they are sceptical about the future of the country or the world.

CYP are most concerned about rising prices, environment and crime, followed by new illnesses/pandemics, inequity and online safety.

- Concerns do not vary much by gender, age group or perception of family wealth. However, a larger proportion of CYP from all other ethnic backgrounds (compared to white backgrounds) were generally more worried across topic areas, especially about inequality.

Most (3 in 4) CYP feel ‘very’/‘quite’ positive about their own future.

- Having ‘somewhere to live’, having ‘enough money’ and ‘finding a job’ were rated as most important factors for their future aspirations. ‘Going to university’ was rated as the least important. CYP from lower income households are more likely to be worried about all aspects of their future (Children’s Society, 2023).

Yet, there is concern about the future of the country and the world, and the impacts on CYP own futures.

- Only about 1 in 3 felt positive about the future of the country or that of the world. Concerningly, just over 4 in 10 CYP did not feel positive about the future of the country or the world. This broader view contributes to CYP generally feeling less happy about ‘the future’ vs. other aspects of their life (Children’s Society, 2023).
- Key factors contributing to CYP future happiness and well-being include: living in a peaceful country which is responsive to CYP needs; environmental preservation and addressing climate change; and empowering CYP to express themselves, have a say in decisions that affect their lives, and for these views to be given sufficient regards by adults in power. Some opportunities to have a say have appeared as tokenistic gestures (ONS, 2020).
- Key well-being priorities include preventing conflicts, tackling inequalities, addressing homelessness, and reducing tuition fees. CYP emphasized the importance of freedom, autonomy and self-reliance, independence and opportunities to learn from mistakes, and opportunities to participate in decision-making.

CYP see the importance of engaging in ‘worthwhile’ community activities, such as helping others, looking after a pet or giving back to the community through volunteering.

- Girls have become more connected with their communities over the past decade. More are actively engaging in social causes and show a notable increase in environmental activism since 2010 (Girlguiding, 2023).

Essex insight:

- During and in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, some Essex YP have formed negative views about the country’s leadership (R&CI, 2022a).
- ‘Anti-racism’ and ‘animal cruelty’ were voted within the three focus areas by Multi-schools council in 2020.

Protective and risk factors

Protective (resilience) and risk factors

The complexity of the relationships between the factors influencing CYP wellbeing means that we cannot always draw straight-forward conclusions about generalisable causal links. The impact that these factors have also depends upon the resilience of the child or young person affected. Again, the evidence suggests that the resilience of any child or young person is a function of a series of protective and risk factors operating at the individual, family and community level. These are summarised in the table below.

Protective factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social, emotional and communication skills • High self-esteem and self-efficacy • Secure attachment experience • Perception of control and one's ability to impact their own life • Intellectual capacity and cognitive competencies, problem solving skills • Advantaged socio-economic status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective/supportive parenting and caregiving, affection • Strong family values • Low family stress • Sound parental mental health • Support for education • Absence of substance misuse • Sense of safety • High standard of living, incl. housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive network (from extended family, wider community) • Positive relationships, e.g. friends, peers, mentors • Safe neighbourhood • Feels part of a community (religious, faith or any other) • Extra-curricular activities, incl. access • Positive school experience, e.g. effective teachers at school, opportunities to speak up, supporting mental health at school, effective policies
	Level	INDIVIDUAL (child or young person)	FAMILY
Risk factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social, emotional and communication difficulties • Low self-esteem • Learning disabilities, specific developmental delay etc. • Low educational attainment • Challenging temperament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living in an unstable environment • Socio-economic disadvantage • Family disharmony or break-up • Inconsistent parenting • Child abuse • Substance misuse, mental health illness • Parental criminality, alcoholism • Death and loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of positive relationships • Negative peer pressure • Socio-economic disadvantage • Adverse life events, incl. negative global events • Lack of access to support services • Bullying • Discrimination

Next steps

Gaps in evidence

There is a substantial body of evidence on children and young people – their general wellbeing and more specific domains of their lives. Although there are some local nuances, the evidence that is specific to Essex suggests that the **experiences of children and young people across the county are broadly similar with those identified and examined through national research.**

Examination of the overall evidence base does, however, suggest that there are limitations in the understanding around how themes relating to personal wellbeing play out for:

- **Specific groups:** there is limited research understanding the specific experiences of different groups, and the differentials that exist between these (i.e. minority ethnic groups, young people with disabilities, LGBTQ+);
- **Specific locations:** considerations of 'place' are largely absent from the national research. Very little has been done to understand how the specific local contexts in which children and young people live influence wellbeing – despite recognised links between place and issues such as poverty, physical and mental health;
- **Different age groups:** there is very limited research on the views and experience of younger children below the age of 10. Research on the experience of these groups is (rightly) mediated / captured via the family and their parents/carers.

Defining next steps

Our work so far has focused on:

- reviewing existing research evidence produced nationally and by partners in Essex;
- engaging partners and stakeholders in Essex on research priorities; and
- drawing together the insights and conclusions from previous engagement exercises undertaken locally with children and young people.

Based on this, we propose that the next phase of this work focuses on:

- identifying, examining and 'bringing to life' the experiences of children and young people in specific populations and communities across Essex on key issues highlighted through the national research;
- foregrounding the lived experience of young people from these groups and places in a way that engages service providers, commissioners and policy-makers, enabling and encouraging reflection on existing priorities and practices.

To make this effective, this work should focus on gathering insight using a range of creative, visual and engaging techniques. The outputs of which should be capable of engaging a range of system stakeholders and illustrating how the trends and patterns identified in national research are realised in young people's day-to-day lives.

We would envisage these outputs being used to support discussions across a series of participatory workshops with stakeholders considering how collective action can help address local challenges.

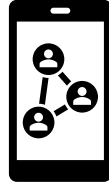
Defining next steps

Based on our research and engagement activity so far, the following themes have emerged as key areas of focus:



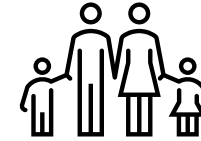
Financial awareness and resilience

- YP's own financial literacy
- YP's perceptions of household financial situation
- Awareness of family's financial situation and the impacts on other aspects of their lives
- Examining differential experiences across more and less deprived communities in Essex



Social media experiences

- Online habits and experiences, how YP manage them – frequency, nature of use
- Coping strategies, impact on relationships and impact on self-esteem
- Examining how protective factors are distributed and employed across different social groups



Family relationships & dynamics

- How are these changing? How do family dynamics typically differ across cultures in Essex?
- Impact on YP's feelings of security and life choices
- Effectiveness of family structures as a trusted source of support



Young people's futures

- Understanding young people's journey towards forming and fulfilling their aspirations
- Role models – who inspires them, who supports them?
- Appeal of different post-education pathways
- Examining differential experiences across different socio-economic groups, ethnic groups and amongst those with protected characteristics



Listening to CYP

- CYP want to be listened to and valued for their views and contributions, and these to be taken on board and acted upon.
- How do CYP want to be engaged, in and outside of school, and on what?
- How does this vary across different cohorts?



Experience of discrimination

- How do different communities experience discrimination and 'othering'?
- What are the factors that drive this? And what are the knock-on impacts?
- Potential to explore experiences across groups with protected characteristics.

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