

The Good Childhood Report 2023

Summary and recommendations

The Children's Society

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Introduction

Now in its twelfth year, The Good Childhood Report focuses on children's own views of how their lives are going, which is called their subjective wellbeing.

"Wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future."

What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2022)[1]

Measuring children's wellbeing allows us to understand how they feel about their lives, and to identify particular areas, or groups of children, that need further attention or support.

This report summarises the main findings from The Good Childhood Report 2023,[2] and presents The Children's Society's call for action, having developed a set of recommendations for how things can be improved together with children and young people.[3]

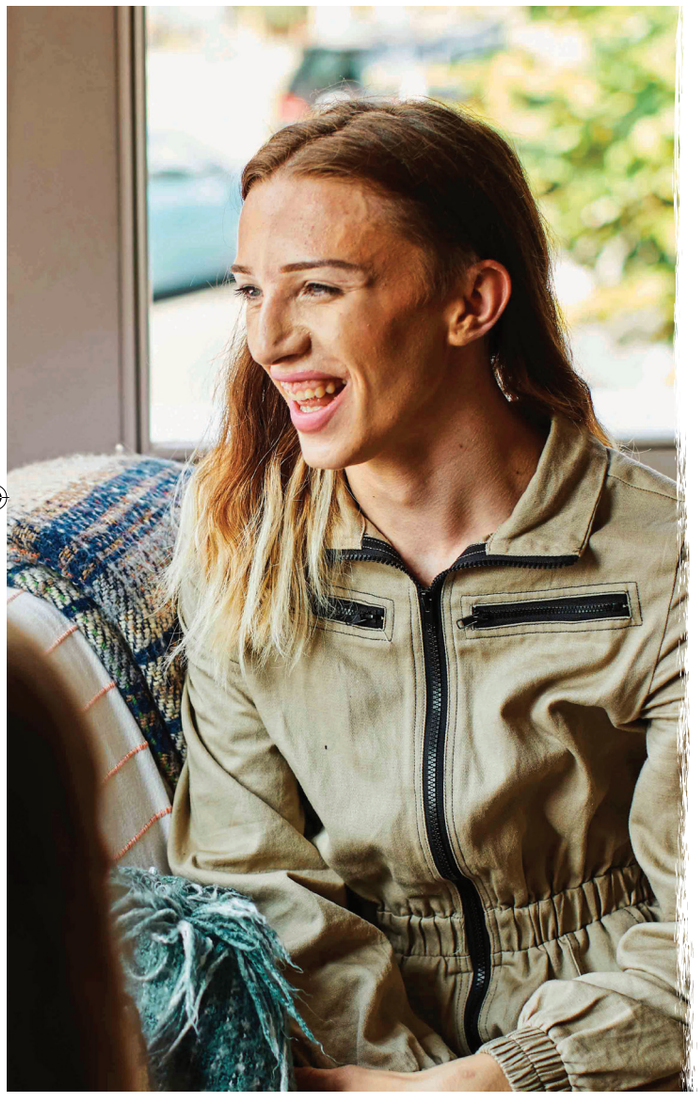


[1] What Works Centre for Wellbeing. What is Wellbeing? [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: **whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing**.
[2] See The Good Childhood Report 2023.
[3] Unless specified otherwise, in this report 'we' refers to The Children's Society.

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Data sources used in The Good Childhood Report 2023

In the absence of widescale and regular national measurement of children's wellbeing, which The Children's Society has been calling for, The Good Childhood Report 2023 uses two robust data sources on children's wellbeing.[4]



The Children's Society's annual household survey

The Children's Society currently surveys around 2,000 UK children and young people (aged 10 to 17) and their parent or carer annually. The children and young people who take part in the survey are chosen to match the UK population in terms of their age, gender, the region or country of the UK that they live in, and their household's socio-economic group.[5]

This year, 2,001 children and young people responded to our survey (in May to June 2023) and told us how they felt about different aspects of their lives.

Understanding Society (UK Longitudinal Household Survey)[6]

Understanding Society is a large survey of thousands of households in the UK. The sample is representative of the wider population, so the findings provide an accurate picture of people's lives and experiences. It is a longitudinal study, which means that it follows the same households over a long period of time.

Households are interviewed each year, with adults and children aged 10 to 15 taking part.[7] The latest data available are for 2020-21 (or wave 12), when 1,663 children completed a youth questionnaire.

[4] To note, both sources only allow for male and female gender analysis. Understanding Society asks children if they are male or female, and The Children's Society's survey asks children if they are male, female, or prefer not to say, which means that it is not clear how children who identify as trans, non-binary, or with other gender-non-conforming identities might answer this question. Unfortunately, even if other options were added to these surveys, sample sizes are too small to allow for analysis of findings for those young people who do not respond male or female. We recognise that the approach taken by both sources is problematic given evolving understanding of gender and increased awareness of different gender identities. The sample sizes for these surveys also limit our ability to look at differences in responses to these surveys by ethnic group. As household surveys, they will also necessarily exclude some groups of children. We acknowledge these limitations and will continue to explore how we can better represent the experiences of different subgroups of children in future reports.
[5] This is based on the social grade of the main income earner.
[6] For further details, see: Understanding Society. The UK household longitudinal study [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: **understandingsociety.ac.uk/**.
[7] A small number of 9- and 16-year-olds were also included in some waves and are also captured in the analysis presented in this report (unless otherwise stated).

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Children's subjective wellbeing over time, from Understanding Society

We use responses from the Understanding Society survey to look at how children's wellbeing is changing over time.

In 2020-21, **children's (aged 10 to 15) mean scores for happiness with their life as a whole, their friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were all significantly lower than when the survey began** in 2009-10. Family was the only aspect of life where there had been no significant change in children's mean happiness score since the survey started.[8]

In 2020-21, on average, children were most happy with their family and least happy with their appearance.

The latest data seem to paint a **worrying picture for girls**, with their mean happiness scores for each of the six measures significantly lower in 2020-21 than in 2009-10. Also, on average girls were still significantly less happy with their appearance than boys, which has been the case since the survey started.

Understanding Society asks 10- to 15-year-olds in the UK how they feel about:



Life as a whole



Family



Friends



Appearance



School



Schoolwork

[8] The means presented in The Good Childhood Report 2023 differ slightly from those presented in previous Good Childhood Reports, due to some changes to the most recent Understanding Society datasets available from the UK data service.

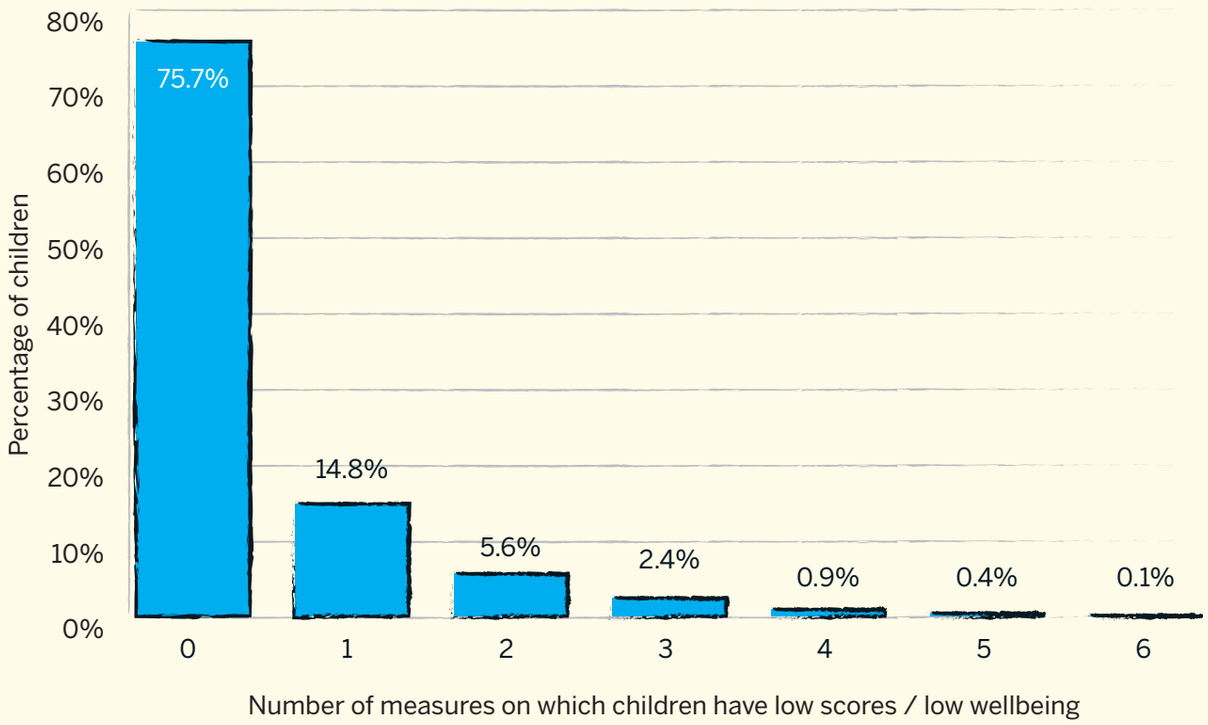
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Analysis of Understanding Society data on children with low wellbeing

We were keen to understand more about those children (aged 10 to 15) who have low wellbeing, and to find out whether the same children score low (or below the midpoint of the scale) across the six measures of subjective wellbeing included in Understanding Society.[9] To do this, we combined data from all waves of Understanding Society (from 2009-10 to 2020-21), to have a large sample to work from.[10] This approach allowed us to look into the experiences of specific groups and had the advantage of being able to look at the impact of multiple factors on children's wellbeing.

Reassuringly, most children did not feel unhappy (or score below the midpoint of the scale) about any of the six aspects of their life. But **about a quarter (24.3%) of children did feel unhappy with at least one aspect of their life.**[11]

Figure 1. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) unhappy with multiple aspects of life across survey waves.



Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

[9] A small number of 9- and 16-year-olds responded to the Understanding Society youth survey, but these are not included in the analysis presented on this page and the next.
[10] Some of the questions we looked at were not asked in every wave of the survey, which meant that some analyses were conducted using data from a number of specific waves (rather than across all waves).
[11] In order to conduct this analysis, a 'low subjective wellbeing score' was created (with scores from 0 to 6 to represent the number of measures that children had low wellbeing scores on across the six measures included in the survey).

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There were some differences in how likely children were to have low wellbeing scores according to some of their characteristics or circumstances. For example, when only demographic characteristics were considered, **girls were more likely to be unhappy with their appearance, friendships, and life as a whole than boys, while boys were more likely to be unhappy with schoolwork.**[12]

The analysis showed that family was the aspect of life (of the five examined: family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork) most strongly related to children's overall wellbeing,[13] and that **children's relationships with their family and friends were important for their wellbeing. Feeling unsupported by family, having no friends, or having been bullied at school** were associated with being unhappy with one or more of the six aspects of life that children were asked about.[14]



[12] This was based on a series of logistic regressions exploring how children being unhappy with the six aspects of life examined in Understanding Society was related to their individual characteristics and family circumstances when other factors were held constant.
[13] Based on a logistic regression exploring whether children being unhappy with the five specific aspects of life they were asked about in the Understanding Society survey (e.g. family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork) predicted their low happiness with life as a whole, when controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and wave of the survey.
[14] Children who did not feel supported by their family were more than six times more likely to feel unhappy with life as a whole (17.7%) as children who felt supported in most things (2.8%). Children who had experienced 'a lot' of non-physical bullying at school (9.5%) were over three times more likely to be unhappy with their life as a whole compared to children who had never experienced non-physical bullying (2.8%). Children who had no friends (9.8%) were over twice as likely to be unhappy with their life as a whole compared to children who had 3 or more friends (3.8%).

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Most recent figures on children's wellbeing from The Children's Society's household survey 2023

Our annual survey, conducted in May to June this year, offers a very recent snapshot of how children and young people feel about their life as a whole and different aspects of their lives.

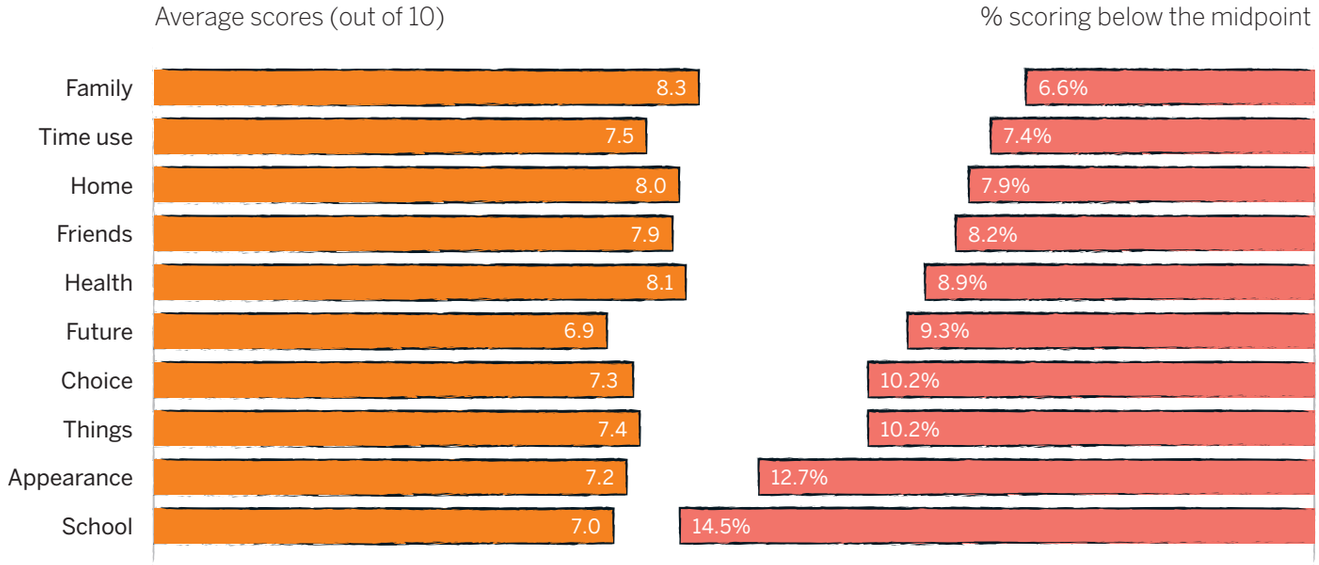
In 2023, **10% of children and young people (aged 10 to 17) who took part in the survey had low wellbeing** (that is, they scored below the midpoint on a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction).[15]

The Children's Society's annual household survey asks 10 to 17-year-olds in the UK how happy they feel about ten different aspects of their life (see figure 2): this is called the **Good Childhood Index.**[16]

Children and young people were, on average, most happy with their family. More children and young people (14.5%) were unhappy (or scored below the midpoint on a 0 to 10 scale) with school than with any of the nine other aspects of life they were asked about.

Given the rise in the cost of living affecting the UK, parents and carers completing the 2023 survey were asked how concerned, if at all, they were about the **impact of cost of living increases** on their family/household over the next 12 months. Over **four in five (82%) said that they were either 'very' or 'quite' concerned.**[17]

Figure 2. 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').

[15] This is based on responses to a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction, based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale. See: Huebner ES. Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. School Psychology International. 1991; 12: 231-40.
[16] The Good Childhood Index was developed by The Children's Society and is made up of ten single-item domain measures which ask children about their happiness with specific aspects of life, presented in Figure 2, and the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction previously mentioned (see footnote 15).
[17] 17% were 'not very' or 'not at all' concerned, and less than 2% responded 'not sure'/'prefer not to say'.

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Analysis of The Children's Society's household survey 2023 data on children with low wellbeing

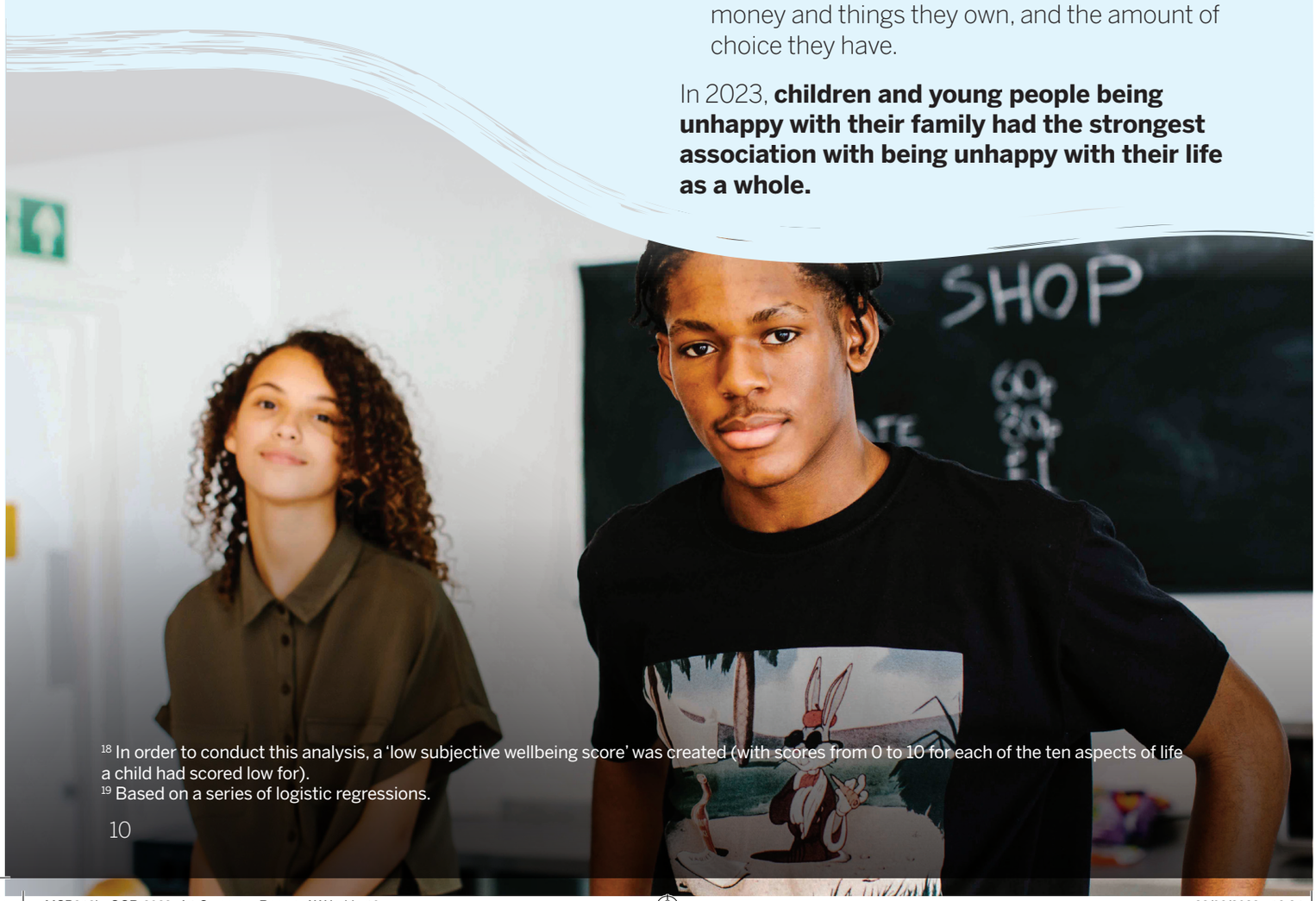
We wanted to do similar analysis looking at children with low wellbeing to that presented above (based on Understanding Society), using responses to The Children's Society's most recent household survey. Although the sample size was much smaller, the Good Childhood Index (which is included in the survey) asks children and young people about more aspects of life than Understanding Society. Like the analysis presented above, this looked at responses to multiple questions at the same time, allowing us to better understand the impact of different factors on children's wellbeing.

Again, most children and young people (aged 10 to 17) did not feel unhappy about any of these 10 aspects of life. But **almost a third (30%) were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life,** and nearly one in ten (9%) with four of more.[18]

The analysis showed different patterns for some groups of children and young people.[19] For example:

- **15-year-olds were more likely to be unhappy with their school, appearance, future, and time** use than both younger and older children and young people.
- **Children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) were more likely than those without SEN to be unhappy with their health and their friends.**
- **Children and young people who worried about how much money their family had were more likely to be unhappy** with every aspect of life than those who did not worry about how much money their family had. The clearest associations were with their home, the money and things they own, and the amount of choice they have.

In 2023, **children and young people being unhappy with their family had the strongest association with being unhappy with their life as a whole.**



[18] In order to conduct this analysis, a 'low subjective wellbeing score' was created (with scores from 0 to 10 for each of the ten aspects of life a child had scored low for).
[19] Based on a series of logistic regressions.

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Children and young people's views about the future and worries about society

Children's wellbeing – how they feel – is linked to their hopes and worries about the future. As society continues to face turbulence and uncertainty both in the UK and internationally, The Children's Society's household survey asked children and young people how they feel about the future, as well as a range of issues in society.

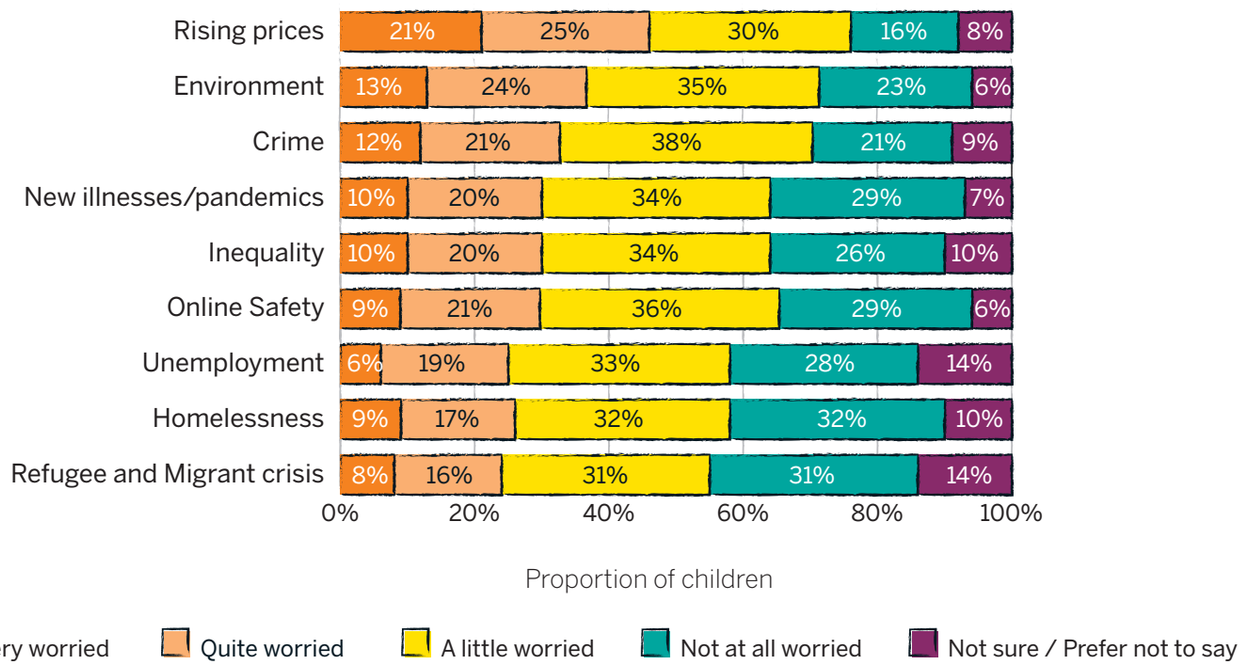
Children and young people's worries about aspects of life relevant for their future

- Of a list of seven issues they were asked about, **having enough money was the item that more children and young people worried about**, followed by finding a job and getting good grades at school.[20]
- **Larger proportions of children with low wellbeing, and who thought that their family was not well off, worried about all seven issues.**

Children and young people's worries about issues in society

- Children and young people were asked how much they worried about nine broader issues. **In 2023, rising prices were the top worry for children**, followed by the environment.[21]

Figure 3. Extent of children's (aged 10 to 17) worry about broader issues.



Source: The Children's Society household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

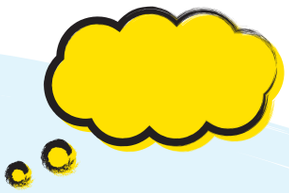
[20] 37% of children and young people were 'very' or 'quite' worried about having enough money; 33% were 'very' or 'quite' worried about being able to find a job; 31% were 'very' or 'quite' worried about getting good grades at school/college. The other items that they were asked about were: having somewhere to live; being able to go to university (if they want to); their mental health; and their physical health.
[21] It is important to note that some of the items have high levels of 'not sure' and 'prefer not to say' responses. These responses are important in giving us a sense of children's knowledge and understanding of these social and/or political issues, and mean that these data should be treated with some caution.

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Children and young people's views about their future, the future of the country and of the world

- Children and young people were asked how positive they felt about their own future, the future of the country, and the future of the world. Overall, they were more optimistic about their own future. **About three quarters (74%) of children and young people felt positive about their own future. But less than four in 10 felt positive about the future of the country (38%) and the future of the world (36%).**[22]



Children and young people's feelings of safety in different situations

Our survey this year also asked how older children and young people (in secondary school and above) felt about their safety in seven different settings and situations.

Encouragingly, **the majority of children and young people** agreed with sentences saying that they **felt safe in six of these seven situations.**[23]

→ The exception was **'I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night': just under half of children and young people (47%) agreed with this statement.**[24]

It is perhaps not surprising that **a bigger proportion of girls than boys disagreed that they felt safe in their local area at night.** Higher proportions of children and young people **with low wellbeing** and those **who thought that their family was not well off also disagreed that they felt safe when out in their local area at night**, as well as with the sentence 'I feel safe when I am outside of my local area'.

[22] It is important to note that these three questions had higher than usual levels of 'not sure' / 'prefer not to say' responses (11%, 19%, and 19% respectively). Again, this gives us a helpful sense of children and young people's knowledge and opinions, and means that these findings should be treated with some caution.
[23] Over 8 in 10 agreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe at school/college, on their way to/from school/college, when using their phone, tablet, laptop or other devices, when out with their friends, and when out in their local area during the day. About two thirds (63%) agreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe when outside of their local area.
[24] To note, 12% of children and young people responded 'not applicable' to the statement 'I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night' (a higher proportion than for the other statements), which should be taken into account when using these findings.

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Discussion: what have we learnt?

The Good Childhood Report 2023 presents the latest information about children's wellbeing in the UK. It matters because it gives us – all of us, but most importantly, those responsible for making decisions – an opportunity to listen to how children and young people tell us they are feeling.

It also points to areas and groups of children that need attention and support.

From The Children's Society's household survey 2023:

Children and young people's responses to our own household survey this year suggest that while the majority of children and young people lead relatively happy lives, **there is a small proportion of children and young people who are unhappy** either with their life in general (which is called 'overall life satisfaction') or with specific aspects of their life.

Our analysis showed that it does not seem to be the same children and young people who are unhappy across the ten specific aspects of life examined, but that some children are more likely to be unhappy.

- **Those children and young people who worried about how much money their family had were more likely to be unhappy** than those without financial worries with all the different aspects of their life that they were asked about (and particularly with their home, money and possessions, and the amount of choice they have).

When we asked children and young people how they felt about their own future and issues in society, **they were more worried about having enough money in their future, and about rising prices**. All these findings are striking, and perhaps not surprising, giving the current economic context of increases to the cost of living.

Last year's Good Childhood Report focused on children and young people's experiences of school.[25] Responses to our survey this year again highlight school as an area that needs further attention, **with more children and young people unhappy with school than with the other nine aspects of life** that they were asked about.

Our analysis again showed the importance of family for children's wellbeing: children and young people being unhappy with their family had the strongest association with being unhappy with their life as a whole.

From Understanding Society (2009-10 to 2020-21):

Analysis of Understanding Society data shows that **children's average wellbeing with all but one aspect of life (family) was lower in 2020-21 than at the start of the survey.**

The latest data also suggest that **the wellbeing of girls needs more attention**, with their average happiness with the six aspects of life asked about lower in 2020-21 (the latest data) than at the start of the survey. The Children's Society will continue to look at this in future to understand more about what may be going on for girls.

Our analysis of combined data from the start of Understanding Society up until the most recent survey wave offered valuable findings about children with low wellbeing – those who aren't happy with their life as a whole, or with different aspects of their life. It showed that:

- It is not the same children who are unhappy across the six measures.
- **Family relationships are important for children's wellbeing**, particularly children **feeling supported by their family.**
- **Children in families who are struggling financially are more likely to be unhappy with school** – another finding which will resonate given the current rises to the cost of living.

[25] See The Good Childhood Report 2022.

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Main comment

Over the last few years, children and young people have been growing up in the UK in the context of a global pandemic, followed by big increases to the cost of living. The Good Childhood Report 2023 looks at how young people feel about their lives and the future, with some clear areas for attention.

While the majority of children and young people seem to lead relatively happy lives, **there is a small, but important, proportion of children and young people who are unhappy with one or more aspect of their life.**[26]

Children's average happiness with all but one of the six Understanding Society measures (life as a whole, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork) was lower in the most recent wave (2020-21) than when the survey started in 2009-10. The only exception was **family.**

The Good Childhood Report 2023 shows that family is important for children's wellbeing in several different ways:

- In Understanding Society's latest data (2020-21) and in The Children's Society's household survey 2023, **family was the aspect of life that children and young people were, on average, happiest with.**
- Analysis of both Understanding Society data from 2009-10 to 2020-21 and The Children's Society's household survey 2023 showed that **family was the aspect of life most strongly related to children's overall wellbeing** (or being unhappy with life as a whole), echoing our previous research.[27]
- Analysis of Understanding Society data showed the importance of positive family relationships for children's wellbeing, with **children who did not feel supported by their family more than six times more likely to feel unhappy with their life as a whole** (17.7%) as children who felt supported in most things (2.8%) by their family.

The Children's Society's household survey 2023 explored how children and young people feel about some aspects of their future and issues in society:

- **Having enough money was children and young people's top worry** from a list of seven issues important to their future.
- Of a separate list of nine issues in society, **more children and young people were worried about rising prices.**
- **While many children and young people were optimistic about their own future, a much smaller proportion of them were positive about the future of the country and of the world.**

These findings need to be acted upon. The next section covers The Children's Society's calls for action, having developed a set of policy recommendations together with children and young people.



[26] Looking at both Understanding Society and The Children's Society's household survey 2023.
[27] See: Rees G, Bradshaw J, Goswami H, and Keung A. Understanding Children's Well-being: A national survey of young people's well-being. The Children's Society: London; 2010; The Children's Society. Developing an index of children's well-being in England. The Children's Society: London; 2010.

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Policy landscape

Since our last Good Childhood Report, there has been considerable policy development across several areas that are related to children's wellbeing.

- Last year, we highlighted the opportunity that the Department of Health and Social Care's (DHSC) 10-year mental health and wellbeing plan could create for vital cross-government action and accountability for children's wellbeing. However, in January 2023 the Government announced that the mental health and wellbeing plan would be replaced by a broader **major conditions strategy**.[28] While we welcome the commitment that mental health issues will be tackled urgently alongside conditions like cancer, we are concerned that this new strategy will be insufficient in meeting the level of change and support that children and young people need for their mental health and wellbeing.
- The Government published its social care implementation strategy for consultation in early 2023. **Stable Homes, Built on Love** responds to the recommendations made by **The independent review of children's social care**.[29,30]
- The Online Safety Bill is (at the time of writing) making its way through the final stages in Parliament, which we hope will provide children with increased protection from harmful content.
- The Department for Education (DfE) announced a **review of relationships, sex and health education** (RSHE) which will result in new statutory guidance for schools.[31]
- The DfE published its **SEND and alternative provision improvement plan**.[32]
- The **new school curriculum** in Wales became mandatory for pupils up to year 7 from September 2022. Health and wellbeing are key areas of learning, including physical health and development, mental health, and emotional and social wellbeing.[33]
- The Welsh Government has consulted on the development of a new **national mental health strategy** which promises to build on the work of the previous Together for Mental Health and Talk to Me 2 strategies.[34]



[28] Department for Health and Social Care. Major conditions strategy: call for evidence [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.uk/government/consultations/major-conditions-strategy-call-for-evidence/major-conditions-strategy-call-for-evidence.**
[29] Department for Education. Children's social care: stable homes, built on love [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.uk/government/consultations/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love**.
[30] The National Archives. Independent Review of Children's Social Care's website [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122449/https:/childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/**.
[31] Department for Education. Review of relationships, sex and health education to protect children to conclude by end of year [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.uk/government/news/review-of-relationships-sex-and-health-education-to-protect-children-to-conclude-by-end-of-year**.
[32] Department for Education. SEND and alternative provision improvement plan [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.uk/government/publications/send-and-alternative-provision-improvement-plan**.
[33] Welsh Government. Area of learning and experience Health and Well-being [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/health-and-well-being/**.
[34] Welsh Government. Mental health strategy [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.wales/mental-health-strategy#:~:text=The%20strategy%20will%20guide%20the,these%20strategies%20is%20now%20complete**.

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Ambition for the future

The Children's Society's findings show that children's happiness with their lives has declined. Alongside these, over the past year several reports have highlighted a deterioration in children and young people's mental health, with waiting times and thresholds for accessing care increasing.[35] There are also reports of children's physical health declining, as the increased cost of living forces children to go hungry and eat less nutritious food.[36]

The children's sector is in agreement that more must be done to prevent problems from arising in the first place. Prevention stops children from needing more intensive support later on, promotes good wellbeing in the short- and long-term, and reduces the pressures on services.

The National Audit Office published a report in 2023 assessing **Progress in improving mental health services in England** which found that, despite government plans emphasising the importance of preventative services, limited NHS investment had been made and local authorities described a continued lack of funding for prevention.[37]

Similarly, the Government risks losing the opportunities offered by the 10-year mental health plan. Focusing primarily on mental illness in the major conditions strategy is unlikely to result in a long-term approach to prevention and early intervention for children across all government departments.



[35] NHS Digital. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 - wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: **digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey**; Children's Commissioner. Children's Mental Health Services 2021-22 [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 August 4]. Available from: **childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/29751/**.

[36] SAPHNA. Press Release: Health Practitioners Survey - Child Hunger Leading To Deterioration In Children's Health [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **saphna.co/news/press-release-health-practitioners-survey-child-hunger-leading-to-deterioration-in-childrens-health/**; Barnardo's. At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living on children and young people [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/impact-of-cost-of-living**.

[37] National Audit Office. Progress in improving mental health services in England [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Progress-in-improving-mental-health-services-CS.pdf**.

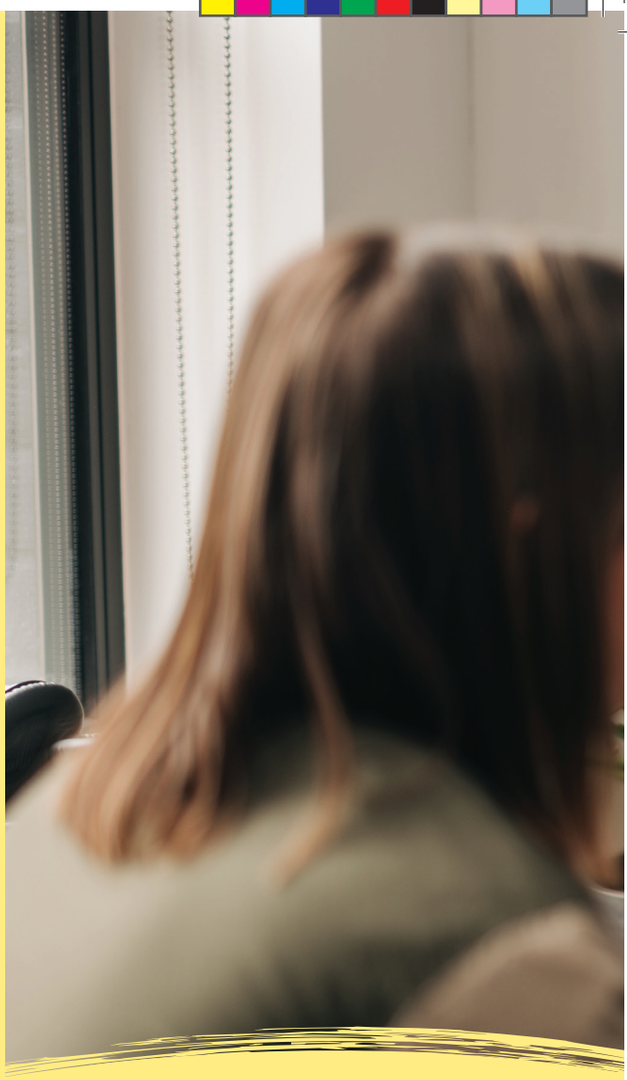
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Recommendations

There can be no further delay in prioritising improvements in children's wellbeing and happiness with their lives. Families are facing unprecedented pressures. Many are at breaking point and urgently need a safety net.

Over 250 children and young people shared their ideas, experiences, and suggestions for what needs to change to improve children's wellbeing to help create this year's policy recommendations. Co-design with children and young people must be at the centre of all proposed reforms.

More detail and additional recommendations for each of the key themes below are set out in the following pages.



The Children's Society's priority recommendations

Protecting children from the rising cost of living ...

by renewing investment in social security for children through an increase to child benefits. As a minimum, the Government should target increases for the families facing the brunt of price rises by uplifting the child element of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit and removing the two-child limit.

Standing up for children to build hope and security for their futures ...

by creating Cabinet-level posts of Minister for Children in both the UK and Welsh governments to share children's views at the highest level of political decision making and champion children's needs across all government departments.

Creating a system that starts with prevention ...

by understanding how children are doing. The Government should measure children's subjective wellbeing at least annually and on a much larger national scale across England and Wales.



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Taking responsibility for girls' unhappiness ...

by commissioning research without further delay. The Government needs to understand why young people, and especially girls, are more unhappy with their appearance, so that effective action can be taken.

Enabling schools to support pupils' wellbeing ...

by expanding mental health support teams (MHSTs) to all schools with long-term funding. DHSC and DfE must make sure that no child in England goes without mental health and wellbeing support at school.

Responding to the needs of parents, carers, and families ...

by working with the voluntary and community sector. DHSC should pilot innovative parent and carer mental health and wellbeing support offers. These could work in partnership with MHSTs and family hubs, once available in all areas.

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Protecting children from the rising cost of living

The impact and significance of the rising cost of living on children and parents and carers can be seen throughout this year's report. Through our engagement with children, we also know that children worry about money at home, they notice prices rising in shops, and see their parents' and carers' concerns about paying for bills and essentials. It is time for decision makers to act on the fact that these worries are affecting children's wellbeing and mental health.[38]

The Government should legislate to create a new child poverty act that sets clear and measurable targets to reduce child poverty and improve children's wellbeing.

Measures that we believe will reduce pressure on families include:

- **Renewing investment in social security for children, which has suffered from years of cuts, freezes and sub-inflationary rises. This can be achieved through increases to child benefits or, as a minimum, a more targeted increase for the families facing the brunt of cost of living price rises by uplifting the child element of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit, and the removal of the two-child limit.**
- Introducing an **essentials guarantee** as laid out by the Trussell Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to make sure that families can afford the basics by setting a minimum level to Universal Credit's standard allowance (set by an independent process) based on the costs of essentials such as food, utilities and vital household goods.[39]
- Extending free school meals to all children whose parents or guardians get Universal Credit, ensuring another 1.5 million children have a decent meal every school day.
- The Government committing to permanent funding for local crisis support, delivered by local authorities to protect families from the impact of financial shocks.



[38] NHS Digital, 2022.
[39] The Trussell Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **jrf.org.uk/report/guarantee-our-essentials**.

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Standing up for children

For too long, decisions about children's lives have been made without meaningfully consulting with them. Children tell us time and time again that they just want to be listened to by the adults around them – from teachers to social workers, police officers and politicians.

At the same time, **YMCA reports** a 73% decline in spending by local authorities on youth services in England since 2010,[40] while **The Children's Society's research** (jointly commissioned with Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, and NSPCC) showed a 50% decline in local authority spending on early intervention children's services since 2010-11.[41]

To build young people's hope for the future, they need:

- **a Cabinet-level post of Minister for Children in both the UK and Welsh governments to share children's views at the highest level of political decision making and champion children's needs across all government departments**
- an increase in government spending to create a complete support package for children, including youth clubs, early support hubs, youth workers and children's mental health practitioners
- mandatory child-rights impact assessments for legislation and policies in England and Wales, as recommended in the **UN Committee report on the rights of the child**.[42]

At The Children's Society, we take a therapeutically-informed youth work approach in our emotional wellbeing and mental health services to empower young people to take ownership of their care. Practitioners build an understanding of who the young person is and what is important to them, and do not identify them by their mental health condition.

[40] YMCA. Generation Cut [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **ymca.org.uk/generation-cut**.
[41] Pro Bono Economics. Stopping the Spiral: Children and Young People's Services Spending 201011 to 2020-21 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Stopping_ the_spiral_Childrens_Services_Funding_Alliance.pdf**.
[42] Children's Rights Alliance for England. Critical UN report shows Government must act to place children at heart of political agenda [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **crae.org.uk/news/critical-un-report-shows-government-must-act-place-children-heart-political-agenda**.

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Creating a system that starts with prevention

Children and young people need a cohesive, responsive, and compassionate system of support that expressly aims to prevent their wellbeing from declining.

Early support hubs

As a proud member of the **#FundTheHubs** campaign,[43] The Children's Society supports the commissioning of **new research** by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) into the effectiveness of the open access hub model.[44]

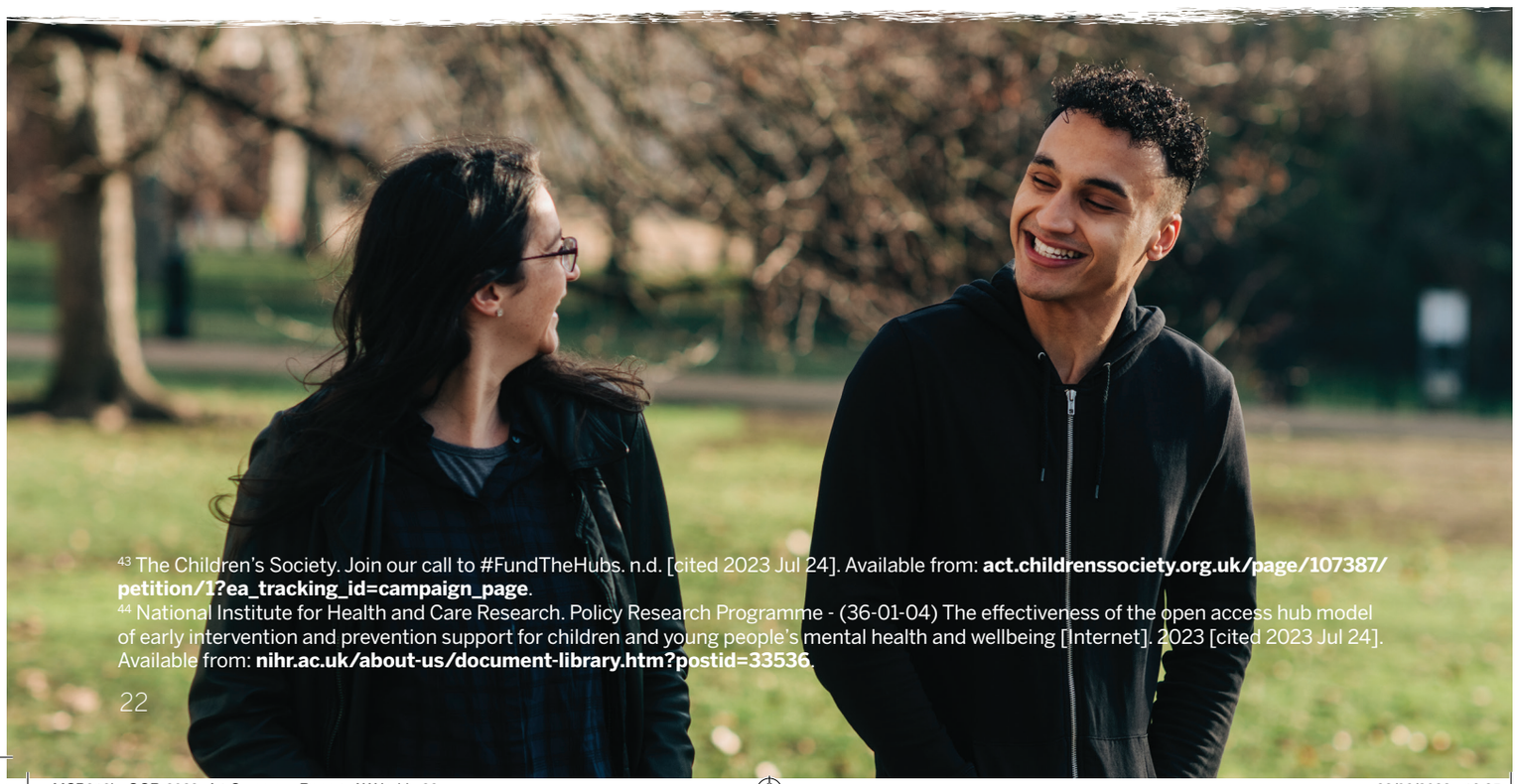
We strongly believe that open access support should be essential provision for young people. A national roll out of hubs to every local area should be a top priority for the Government. Drop-in support in local communities can be particularly effective for young people facing mental health inequalities.

Hubs should be sustainably funded, culturally sensitive, and youth-designed.

Measuring wellbeing

By measuring children's subjective wellbeing, local and national decision makers can better understand ways to improve it – providing children with the happy childhoods they deserve.

- **Children's subjective wellbeing should be measured at least annually and on a much larger national scale across England and Wales to really understand how children are doing.**
- A single comprehensive dataset about children's wellbeing could help policymakers to identify the local areas and groups of children that need targeted funding and support, monitor progress, and hold decision makers to account.
- New polling by The Children's Society (publishing in autumn 2023) shows that the majority of teachers who took part support an annual programme of national wellbeing measurement in schools.



[43] The Children's Society. Join our call to #FundTheHubs. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **act.childrenssociety.org.uk/page/107387/petition/1?ea_tracking_id=campaign_page**.
[44] National Institute for Health and Care Research. Policy Research Programme - (36-01-04) The effectiveness of the open access hub model of early intervention and prevention support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **nihr.ac.uk/about-us/document-library.htm?postid=33536**.

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Taking responsibility for girls' unhappiness

In February 2023, the Government published a disappointing and lacklustre response[45] to the Health and Social Care Committee's report on the impact of body image on mental and physical health.[46] The Government failed to recognise the urgency with which it should respond to young people's unhappiness with their appearance, especially for adolescent girls.

- **Without further delay, DHSC should commission research to understand why young people, and especially girls, are more unhappy with their appearance so that effective action can be taken.**
- In the meantime, DHSC and DfE should utilise the opportunity posed by the various reforms already underway (for example, family hubs, MHSTs, senior mental health lead training, RSHE review) to embed additional support, information, and guidance to improve girls' happiness with their appearance.
- Local authorities should work with girls, and other groups who may feel less safe, to co-design solutions to help young people feel safe in their local area, especially at night. This could be supported by the Local Government Association, which could work with its membership to share good practice examples.

In schools:

- Young people have told us how school policies and procedures can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. The enforcement of school uniform rules – on the length of skirts, for example – can intensify the scrutiny of girls' appearance. Schools should carefully consider how they enforce uniform policies to make sure that girls aren't unfairly targeted, which could reinforce harmful expectations and scrutiny of how girls look.
- Schools should also ensure that they have a robust and consistent response to sexual harassment and bullying. All teachers and school staff should be empowered to consistently challenge sexist behaviour and language.
- Our consultation with young people supports recent **reporting by BBC's Newsround**, which has shown that children are unhappy with not being able to use the toilet during lessons.[47] Schools should consider if they are unduly restricting pupils from using the toilet during lessons. This can create unnecessary distress and discomfort, especially for pupils during their periods and those with medical conditions.

[45] Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Government response to the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee's report on the impact of body image on mental and physical health [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133770/Government-response-to-HSCC-second-report-of-session-2022-to-2023-on-the-impact-of-body-image-on-mental-and-physical-health-print-ready.pdf**.
[46] Health and Social Care Committee. The impact of body image on mental and physical health [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmhealth/114/report.html#heading-6**.
[47] CBBC Newsround. School toilets: Charities say rules on access to school toilets are affecting pupils' health [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **bbc.co.uk/newsround/65857666**.

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Enabling schools to support pupils' wellbeing



In 2023, more children completing our annual survey were unhappy with school than any other aspect of their lives they were asked about, but there is huge potential for schools to support and protect children's wellbeing.

Over the past year, we have consistently heard from teachers that schools are overstretched, with teachers taking on more pastoral responsibilities while trying to stop children falling through the cracks in other systems.

An **evaluation of trailblazer MHSTs** similarly reported that the teams were impacted by long waiting times and restricted capacity for specialist children's mental health services.[48] There were also concerns for children who met neither the MHSTs' 'mild to moderate' criteria nor that of specialist support.

- **The expansion of MHSTs to all schools with long-term funding could not come soon enough to make sure that no pupil in England is without any support.**
- A collaborative approach between DHSC, DfE, and NHS England is needed to alleviate the pressure schools face in trying to help children who can't get the support they need.
- Our engagement with teachers suggests that it could be commonplace for the senior mental health lead in schools to also hold other roles. This might include, for example, the safeguarding, inclusion, and/or attendance lead as well as the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo). DfE should therefore explore whether there is sufficient pastoral support available to schools.
- DfE should consult with children and young people as part of their review of RSHE to make sure that their needs are met through the curriculum content and any proposed changes.

[48] Ellins J, Hocking L, Al-Haboubi M, Newbould J, Fenton S, Daniel K, et al. Early evaluation of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Trailblazer programme: a rapid mixed-methods study. Health and Social Care Delivery Research. 2023; 11(8).

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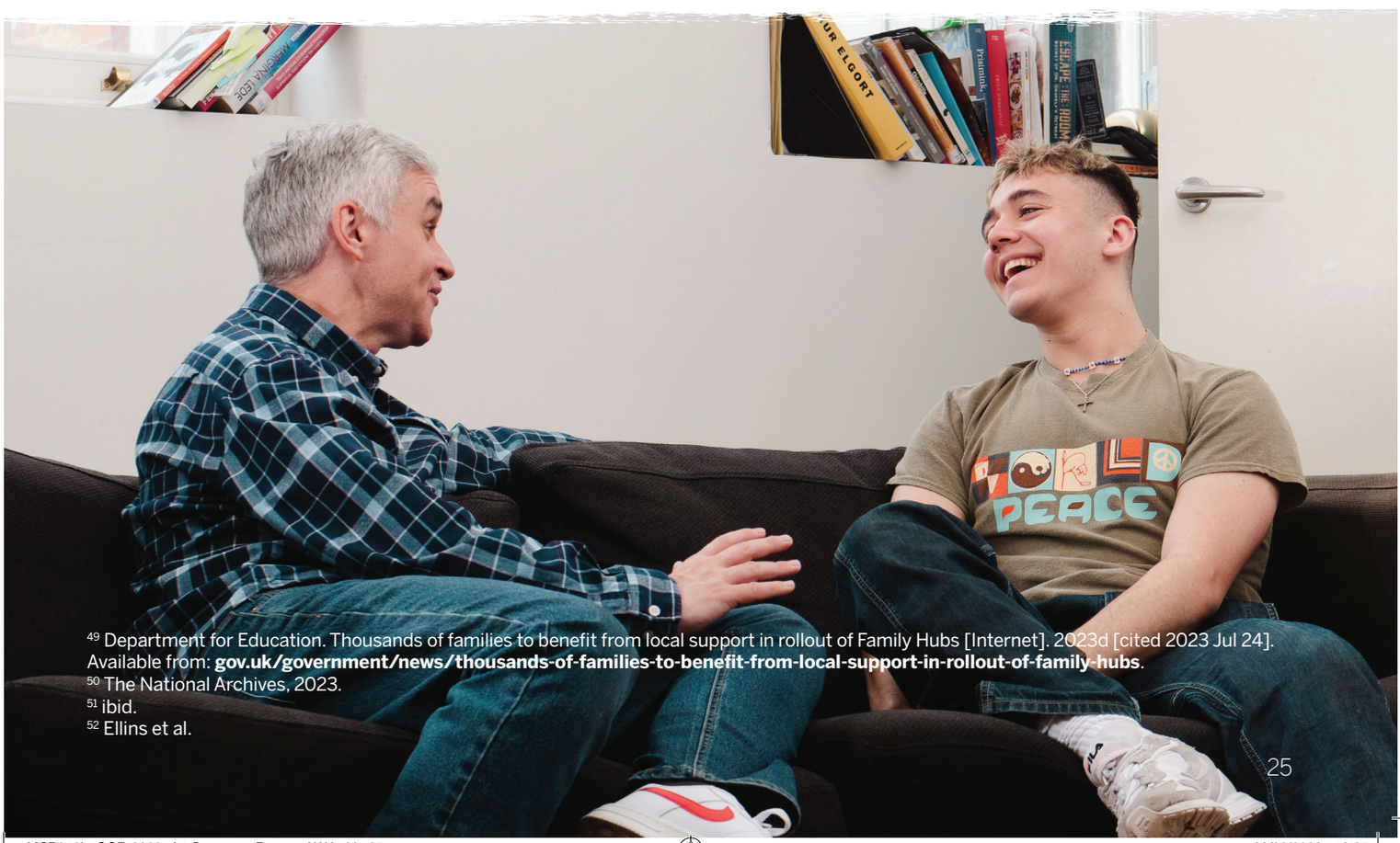
Responding to the needs of parents, carers, and families

Our research shows that a supportive family is very important to children's overall happiness.

While appropriate support for children is vital, our practitioners tell us that it's increasingly challenging to promote good wellbeing in cases where parents and carers are struggling with their own mental health and children's lives at home are dysfunctional or insecure.

This is at least partly due to a lack of family support including family therapy, early help, and accessible pathways through services. While we welcomed the **rollout of family hubs** to additional local areas, we remain concerned that provision is not available across the country.[49] The current delays and funding shortfall for increasing Family Help provision and **reforming children's social care** will result in more children going into care.[50]

- **DHSC should work with the voluntary and community sector to pilot innovative parent and carer mental health and wellbeing support offers which could work in partnership with MHSTs and family hubs once available in all areas.**
- For family hubs to be most effective, we encourage the Government to make them available across the country and look beyond early years to include older children and teenagers. It's essential that community and specialist family services are appropriately resourced to engage with Government reforms and support lower-level long-term needs that may not currently meet high thresholds for help.
- The Government should provide funding for wholesale reform to children's social care at the next fiscal opportunity to provide certainty to the sector. Due to the impact of inflation, and the additional costs stemming from delaying reform, this funding will need to exceed the £2.6 billion recommended by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.[51]
- NHS England, DHSC, and DfE should bolster the role of family support workers in MHSTs. **An evaluation** found that the trailblazer MHSTs frequently cited needs related to support for parents and carers to improve support for children, as well as training around effectively engaging and working with parents.[52]



[49] Department for Education. Thousands of families to benefit from local support in rollout of Family Hubs [Internet]. 2023d [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: **gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-families-to-benefit-from-local-support-in-rollout-of-family-hubs**.
[50] The National Archives, 2023.
[51] ibid.
[52] Ellins et al.

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Every young person should have the right to a safe, happy childhood.

But right now, young people are facing huge risks. They urgently need our help. That's why our services exist to offer them vital support when they need it most. And we campaign alongside young people to bring about a society where all children can look forward to the future with hope.

Together, we can protect every childhood.

Scan here to download and view the Good Childhood Report 2023 publications.

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