



Comprehensive Spending Review 2025: The Case for National Children and Young People's Wellbeing Measurement - Executive Summary

The wellbeing of our children and young people is the foundation of a thriving society. Parents, care givers, teachers, health professionals and young people's charities alike are united in wanting the country's children and young people to thrive. But too many children and young people do not feel this way. The UK's children and young people have the lowest life satisfaction in Europe.¹ 197,000 young people left secondary school with low levels of wellbeing in 2022. That's the same as the total population of Milton Keynes.

Aside from the moral imperative to improve young people's wellbeing, there are also good economic and political reasons to do so. Closing the gap in wellbeing outcomes between the UK and the Netherlands for secondary school age children would provide around £82 billion in wellbeing benefits every year, based on HM Treasury methodologies.² Even narrowing this gap by just 0.1% would deliver benefits that far exceed the costs of implementing a national wellbeing measurement programme - making it an investment with extraordinary returns.

A national wellbeing measurement programme would allow more regular tracking of national progress, support detailed service planning within local communities, enable targeted support for groups of young people struggling the most, help school leaders understand how they are performing and support the development of new evidence on what works for improving children's wellbeing. In doing so, it would directly contribute to a number of this government's missions.

The Opportunity Mission

Enabling all of England's young people to thrive is at the centre of this government's ambitions. To deliver that, young people's voices and experiences need to be heard, and used to improve the services they receive, whether inside or outside school, setting them on a path to success.

National wellbeing measurement would provide schools with necessary data for year-on-year school improvement, allowing in-depth understanding of the experiences of pupils. Wellbeing measurement in participating schools in the London Borough of Havering³ has directly informed decision-making on future approaches to pupil wellbeing, demonstrating how measurement equips teachers and school leaders with better information for delivering school improvement.

¹ The Children's Society, The Good Childhood Report 2024

² The step by step methodology for this calculation included in Appendix 1

³ Havering Youth Wellbeing Census - Wave 2 - Info for Schools (1)

By consistently measuring relative variability in school belonging, national wellbeing measurement would enable precise identification of schools and cohorts of pupils for whom school belonging is lowest. It can help schools understand their performance on issues such as pupil relationships with teachers, bullying, and school stress, and support the analysis of their linkages with attendance. This would equip schools with real insights to understand these challenges and respond, enabling all pupils to be supported to be present and thrive at school.

It would also allow schools and local authorities to monitor and evaluate the extent to which pupils engage in wellbeing-boosting activities, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, and collaborate with local partners to act on the results.

Building an NHS fit for the future

Raising the healthiest generation that has ever lived requires taking a preventative approach to mental and physical health and wellbeing support. It also requires a robust set of national data to monitor such a commitment and inform government action. Given that positive mental health and wellbeing in adolescence are the best predictors of those in adulthood,^{4,5,6,7} supporting young people to thrive requires an intentional approach to shifting the whole system towards prevention, for which national wellbeing measurement is crucial.

Safer streets

The safer streets mission includes commitments to visible neighbourhood policing, a crackdown on anti-social behaviour, and reducing knife crime, all issues with which a national wellbeing measurement programme can assist.

National wellbeing measurement has the potential to help the policing community understand the links between e.g. anti-social behaviour, violence or knife crime, and young people's lives in the neighbourhoods in which they live. Wellbeing measurement questions on young people's perceptions of safety in their community provide direct feedback to police forces on the impact of their approach to neighbourhood policing in a highly localised manner.

Kickstart Economic Growth

There are a range of ways in which wellbeing measurement of children and young people can help drive economic growth. By acting to address wellbeing issues before they become work-limiting health conditions, measurement can help drive interventions that tackle the growing numbers of young people not in employment, education and training,⁸ particularly due to worsening mental health.⁹ In 2023, 1 in 5 young people aged 16 to 24 who were NEET reported a mental health condition, an 11.8% increase since 2012.¹⁰ Research suggests that if the UK reduced the number of young people who are NEET by a third to match Germany's rate, UK GDP could increase by 1.8% in the long-term (equivalent to £38 billion).¹¹

⁴ World Happiness Report, 2024

⁵ Origins of happiness: Evidence and policy implications

⁶ A systematic review of the persistence of childhood mental health problems into adulthood

⁷ Impact of anxiety and depression across childhood and adolescence on adverse outcomes in young adulthood.

⁸ ONS

⁹ Youth Futures Foundation

¹⁰ Department for Education

¹¹ Youth Futures Foundation

National wellbeing measurement will enable local leadership in every part of England. Providing local government and civil society with robust data on young people and their readiness to transition to the workplace, national wellbeing measurement can provide a rounded picture of young people's aspirations and preparedness. For instance, in regions where young people are reporting low levels of wellbeing before leaving education, schools and other local actors can implement tailored preventative measures to tackle the root causes of future potential inactivity. Groups of young people with lower aspirations or less practical experience can be identified and supported.

Conclusion

Investing in a national programme of wellbeing measurement would greatly increase the chances of this government successfully delivering on its missions by:

- ➔ Providing local communities with the data they need to implement a step change in the support provided to children and young people, whether through schools, local government and health systems or local charities;
- ➔ Equipping government departments with the data, analysis and insight they need to improve both the delivery, and the evaluation, of national programmes designed to benefit young people; and
- ➔ Clearly demonstrating to children and young people, and their parents, carers and teachers, that it means what it says when it talks about being a child-centred government, by putting young people's voices at the heart of decision making.

Appendix 1: Methodology for Valuing Increase in Childhood Wellbeing

To understand the potential benefits from improving wellbeing outcomes for children and young people we have calculated the value of benefits that would result from closing the gap in Life Satisfaction scores between the UK and the Netherlands. We have chosen the Netherlands as a culturally and economically similar country with persistently higher Life Satisfaction for its 15-year-olds as a realistic and achievable target for the UK. Our calculation draws on the methodology outlined in HM Treasury's Green Book guidance and follows three key steps:¹

Step 1: Compare Life Satisfaction outcomes for the Netherlands and the UK using OECD PISA data: Data from the most recent OECD study suggests that the average 15 year-old in the Netherlands rated their life satisfaction at 7.3 out of 10, compared to an average score in the UK of 6.1. This is a 1.2 life satisfaction point difference.²

Step 2: Estimate total additional Wellbeing Adjusted Life Years (WELLBYs) from closing the gap: Treasury guidance aggregates wellbeing impacts across individuals using the standardised unit of wellbeing known as a WELLBY. A WELLBY is a one-point improvement in life satisfaction that is sustained for a year. To calculate the number of WELLBYs we multiply the gap in wellbeing identified in Step 1 by the number of secondary school pupils in the UK in 2023/24 (4.3 million). This gives a total potential increase in WELLBYs of 5.3 million.³

¹ HM Treasury: [Green Book supplementary guidance: wellbeing](#), 2021

² OECD: [PISA 2022 Results – Volume II](#), 2024, Table II.B1.1.10

³ Department for Education: [Education and training statistics for the UK](#), 2024, UK Pupils Suppressed Table, includes secondary school and middle school pupil numbers

Step 3: Apply monetary values to changes in wellbeing from HM treasury guidance: We uprate the monetary value of a WELLBY given in the green book supplementary guidance from 2019 prices to 2024 prices, giving us a central value of £15,533 per WELLBY. We then multiply this by the number of WELLBYs identified in Step 2 to give us a total benefit from closing the gap in young people’s wellbeing of £82 billion.

There are a number of important assumptions that sit behind this estimate:

- We have assumed that the gap in Life Satisfaction seen between the Netherlands and the UK is the same for all secondary school age students as it was for 15-year-olds observed in the OECD PISA data in 2022. Unfortunately, comparable international data is not available for other age groups – wellbeing could be higher or lower for other school year groups.
- We have not included any benefits for improving outcomes for primary school age children. There is less consensus about how to measure wellbeing amongst younger pupils and no international data that allows us to compare outcomes against other countries.
- We have used the central valuation from Treasury guidance on the monetisation of wellbeing impacts. If the lower end of the range provided by the Treasury is used then benefits from closing the gap would be £63bn, whilst the high-end of the range would imply benefits of as much as £101bn.
- We do not know how much of this gap would be closed through national children’s wellbeing measurement or the costs of subsequent interventions to tackle any issues identified. The benefits identified should be seen as a “thought experiment” highlighting the potential scale of benefits available from addressing the UK’s children’s wellbeing crisis.
- We have not included the potential benefits over a young person’s lifetime from increasing their wellbeing during childhood. Evidence suggests that emotional outcomes as a teenager are strong predictors of wellbeing as an adult.⁴ However, as yet, there is no established methodology for quantifying these long-term impacts. This is likely to make our estimate very cautious relative to potential life-time benefits.



⁴ Clark et al.: The origins of happiness; the science of well-being over the life course, 2018, Princeton University Press

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