

OUR WELLBEING OUR VOICE



ACT NOW TO MEASURE
YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING
ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Our Wellbeing, Our Voice: Written Evidence to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee

Executive Summary

The Our Wellbeing, Our Voice Coalition welcomes the introduction of the Children's Wellbeing and School's Bill, which seeks to address urgent challenges in the children's social care and schools systems that are damaging wellbeing and preventing young people from thriving. The Coalition is a group of organisations with expertise in children and young people's wellbeing, wellbeing measurement, education and wellbeing economics.

The Bill contains a host of measures to improve the welfare and safeguarding of children and young people. Provisions particularly relating to the strengthening of support for young people with special educational needs (SEN), care-experienced young people, and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, could have significant positive impacts to wellbeing.

Whilst the Bill contains important provisions, it is not a cohesive offering for improving the wellbeing of all children in this country, despite the inclusion of wellbeing in the Bill's title. Supplementing the provisions in the Bill with a national programme of children and young people's wellbeing measurement would therefore provide both strategic focus and a meaningful framework to understand and enhance the Bill's impact.

The clauses of particular relevance and for which we submit evidence and recommendations are as follows:

- **Clause 4**, relating to the single unique identifier. National wellbeing measurement would enable stronger data linkages between public services to strengthen care and improve safeguarding. It would also enable local agencies to shift to prevention and early intervention.
- **Clauses 7 and 8**, relating to Staying Close support for care leavers. A programme of national wellbeing measurement would facilitate a stronger local offer for care leavers, tailored to their specific needs.
- **Clauses 21 and 23**, relating to the introduction of Breakfast Clubs in Primary Schools and a branded school uniform item cap. Data from national wellbeing measurement provides a clearer understanding of the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, allowing for stronger evidence-based support.

- **Clause 24**, relating to a local authority consent mechanism for school withdrawal. National wellbeing measurement would complement interventions to support the wellbeing of young people in school, particularly in preventable areas that often lead to school withdrawal.
- **Clauses relating to Ofsted (11, 12, 16, 36, 37, 38)**. If supported by data from wellbeing measurement, schools can better implement evidence-based interventions to drive ongoing improvement in pupil wellbeing.
- **Clauses relating to a not in school register (25 to 29 and schedule 1)**. Action arising from wellbeing measurement can equip local leaders with the information they need to understand and address the root causes of preventable non-attendance.

Introduction

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. 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. Politically, given that 73% of parents/carers support young people's wellbeing measurement in schools, a national programme ³ would demonstrate to them and to young people themselves, that politicians are listening and their future is a priority.

A national wellbeing measurement programme can create opportunities for change to help reverse the downward trends in children's wellbeing and close the gap against international peers. It will allow greater 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.

The exact response and actions will vary from location to location based on local needs, making it challenging to build a detailed return on investment case at this stage. However, the work of #BeeWell and Pro Bono Economics to evaluate the impact of the Football Beyond Borders programme for pupils at risk of exclusion ⁴ provides one small insight into the way in which national wellbeing measurement could unlock robust evaluation across a range of policy areas.

Implementing a national programme of children and young people's wellbeing measurement would therefore greatly strengthen the measures in the Bill and its potential for supporting all young people to thrive.



Part one: Children's social care

Allow for the creation of a single unique identifier for children and introduce new duties around data sharing (clause 4)

The Bill proposes the introduction of a single unique identifier to connect data between health, education and other public services. This aims to improve safeguarding for young people in contact with multiple services by strengthening information-sharing between professionals.

The introduction of a single unique identifier is important for shifting towards an early intervention and prevention approach by strengthening information-sharing when there are concerns for a young person's welfare. This welcome shift to early intervention would be further facilitated by a national wellbeing measurement; enabling local areas and national government to identify potential trends, including risk factors and protective factors, for a young person's wellbeing. Designing linkages between these datasets would enable local professionals to catch concerns early-on and provide stronger wrap-around care.

Age-appropriate communication to children and young people on how their data will be used is important, as will reassurance that data cannot be used to identify them. Survey data should contain specific mechanisms to guarantee privacy, in line with current data linkages. The data should also only be made public at neighbourhood level, with school-level data not made public to avoid crude league-tables and unfair school accountability. Appropriate controls should be in place to support insightful new research.

Require all local authorities to offer Staying Close support to care leavers where deemed necessary and to include information on procedures to ensure a supportive transition to independent living in their published local offer for care leavers (clauses 7 and 8)

The Bill introduces expanded measures to ensure young people leaving care have access to Staying Close support. The Staying Close model provides a package of support for young people leaving children's homes, including an offer of move-on accommodation, alongside practical and emotional support. These are designed to help develop a young person's confidence⁵ and skills for independent living, as well as supporting their emotional health and wellbeing.

The number of homeless young care leavers aged 18-20 has increased by 54% over the last five years. Care leavers⁶ are also more likely to experience poor mental health than those in⁷ the general population and are more likely to be out of education, employment or training.⁸ Currently in the UK, there is no national data collected concerning the mental health and wellbeing of care leavers.⁹

A national programme of children and young people's wellbeing measurement would allow local authorities under the Bill's expanded provision to design and tailor their Staying Close offer according to the needs of the care-experienced young people directly in their community.

For example, Coram Voice measures and responds to the subjective wellbeing of children in care and care leavers under their Bright Spots programme.¹⁰ Findings have been used by 80 local authorities to influence practice, service development and strategic thinking. Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council used the data to make the business case for further supported accommodation and it contributed to a successful £2.3 million bid to develop a Staying Close initiative to support care leavers in their area.

A programme of national wellbeing measurement would also provide useful evaluation tools for both national and local government to assess programmes of support and make iterative improvements to deliver on the aim of centring young people's wellbeing at the heart of these reforms.

By equipping local authorities with data, they can better deliver on the expanded Staying Close provision in the Bill, and support better outcomes for local young people as they transition out of care and into adulthood.



Part two: Schools

Require state-funded primary schools to provide free breakfast clubs (clause 21)

Place statutory limits on the number of branded items of uniform state funded schools can require (clause 23)

The Bill contains provisions to introduce Breakfast Clubs in Primary Schools and a branded school uniform item cap as interventions to help reduce the cost of living and the impact of poverty on educational outcomes.

In January 2024, the number of pupils eligible for free school meals rose to 2.1 million.¹¹ Young people growing up receiving free school meals typically go on to earn less than their better-off peers,¹² and research shows strong links between poor wellbeing and child poverty.^{13,14}

The provisions in the Bill are significant steps for improving the life chances of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring young people are able to stay in school and ready to learn.

However, other factors similarly affect educational outcomes for this cohort of young people.

Understanding the specific experiences of young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds is crucial for offering stakeholders a clearer picture of the areas in which further initiatives to reduce the impacts of poverty are needed.

For example, research demonstrates that participating in arts, culture, entertainment and sports (PACES) has a positive impact on young people's wellbeing; and yet a third of children from the poorest backgrounds never go to an after-school club or after school activity.¹⁵

Given that positive wellbeing is conducive to academic attainment,¹⁶ a consistent national programme of wellbeing measurement would allow schools and local authorities to monitor and evaluate the extent to which these pupils engage in wellbeing-boosting activities and collaborate with local partners to act on the results. For example, as a result of data from wellbeing measurement in 2023, Curious Minds launched a two-year arts-focused programme¹⁷ to support the health and wellbeing of pupils in schools, illustrating how data drives cross-cutting action to improve opportunities for all young people.

National wellbeing measurement can also provide information on young people's broader health behaviours, including quantities of sleep, rates of physical activity and consumption of fruits, vegetables and confectionery. Given that children and young people growing up in food insecurity are at higher risk of being under or overweight,^{18,19} national wellbeing measurement coupled with the provisions in the Bill, offers a vital opportunity to shift the whole system towards prevention, and promote the best possible outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In strengthening evaluation of the impacts of interventions like breakfast clubs, wellbeing measurement provides crucial data. Alongside related improvements to outcomes such as school attainment, this would support the Government in understanding the impact and cost effectiveness of these initiatives and guide future decision-making.

Introduce a local authority consent mechanism for the withdrawal of certain children from school, including those at special schools (clause 24)

The Bill introduces important provisions to ensure that children with SEN, or who are being supported by children's social care services stay in school. These measures are reactive, in that they will be used to ensure school withdrawal is properly safeguarded when parents and carers have already made the decision to withdraw their child from school. This is set in the context of record levels of funding for SEN support, despite there being no signs of improvements in the life outcomes of children with SEN.²⁰

Young people with SEN, along with care-experienced young people and those with childhood experiences of abuse and neglect, face acute difficulties in school. These cohorts of young people leave education with significantly poorer outcomes than their peers, limiting their life chances,^{21,22,23} and experience lower levels of wellbeing.^{24,25,26}

Research also shows that factors such as school belonging, significantly impact engagement, attendance and academic outcomes,^{27,28,29} and pupils with SEN suffer lower levels of school belonging³⁰ and higher levels of bullying³¹ than their peers.

By providing schools and local services with crucial data for understanding which cohorts of children are experiencing low wellbeing, particularly in the areas that drive non-attendance and school withdrawal, leaders will be better able to target interventions and drive improvements. This means that national children and young people's wellbeing measurement has the potential to transform value for money in DfE expenditure on SEN support, by helping local areas to catch wellbeing concerns early-on and effectively intervene to prevent school withdrawal.

For instance, University of Manchester research³² using wellbeing data has identified numerous ways in which SEN pupils are likely to have worse wellbeing. By analysing how SEN pupils feel about their senses of school belonging, and relating that to issues such as relationships with teachers and exposure to bullying, it has identified how schools can make overall improvements to school belonging for these students. By providing this analysis and trusted methodologies, school leaders can develop and implement strategies to improve pupil-school connection and therefore attendance.

National wellbeing data would offer policymakers a clear view of inclusion in mainstream schools, and provide a mechanism to measure national progress towards stronger school inclusiveness. At a local level, it would allow schools to identify priorities to improve school experience for their SEN pupils - a protective factor for preventatively reducing absences and keeping young people with SEN in school and learning.

Clauses relating to Ofsted (clauses 11, 12, 16, 36, 37, 38)

The Bill introduces a number of measures designed to expand Ofsted's oversight and regulatory powers on institutions concerning children and young people.

However, if supplemented by national wellbeing measurement, all institutions regulated by Ofsted could stand to benefit from concrete data to drive year-on-year improvement, by facilitating in-depth understanding of pupils' experiences. 73% of parents/carers³³ support young people's wellbeing measurement in school. As do school leaders, with the majority of teachers surveyed by The Children's Society³⁴ agreeing that children's wellbeing should be measured in school at least once a year.

Wellbeing measurement in participating schools in the London Borough of Havering³⁵ has directly informed decision-making on future approaches to pupil wellbeing. Bassaleg High School in Newport³⁶ also used a whole school, evidence-based and learner-voice led approach to develop new teaching practices and a revised curriculum that prioritises mental health and wellbeing. These examples demonstrate how measurement equips teachers and school leaders with better information for delivering school improvement.

As such, powerful data to drive school improvement can be applied as a tool for demonstrating understanding and impact to Ofsted. In reforming the system towards a report card approach to drive and inform improvement, national wellbeing measurement enables both schools and Ofsted to have a clear and detailed discussion on pupils' wellbeing, school standards and ongoing improvements.

During the most recent round of inspections, school leaders across the #BeeWell regions used data from wellbeing measurement to support them during inspections,³⁷ providing additional evidence of improved Ofsted-assessed school outcomes. Following the upcoming report card assessments, data will be similarly valuable for strengthening the improvement support offered by the Government's new regional improvement for standards and excellence (RISE) teams.

In this context it is crucial to note that schools are not responsible for all the issues that affect pupils' wellbeing. While there may be a case for publicly assessing school belonging, that is a matter for Ofsted reform and not for wellbeing measurement. We must avoid crude school league tables of wellbeing and unfair school accountability. This is not to say that data cannot be shared across agencies and bodies that play a role in supporting children and young people, as mentioned under clause 4 relating to the single unique identifier.

Introduce a requirement for local authorities to maintain a register of children not in school, with duties for parents and related requirements for school attendance orders to be issued in some cases (clauses 25 to 29 and schedule 1)

The Bill makes provision to introduce a children not in school register to address school absences and improve oversight of children and young people out of mainstream education.

School remains the primary means by which we educate our young people and equip them for adulthood. The Autumn Budget announced a total schools' budget of £63.9 billion in 2025/26.³⁸

Overall non-attendance during the 2023/24 school year was 6.9%.³⁹ The academic year prior, the IPPR calculated that 32 million days of learning were lost.⁴⁰ For those attending school, evidence suggests that promoting the wellbeing of students within schools and colleges has the potential to improve their educational, health and wellbeing outcomes.⁴¹

National wellbeing measurement can help schools understand their performance on factors that contribute to school absences, by asking questions on topics including school belonging, 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 pupils to be supported in being present and thriving at school, rather than relying on speculative judgements on the reasons driving absence.

For example, findings from the OxWell 2023-24 wellbeing measurement programme resulted in schools working with their local authority to develop three-year action plans for improving pupils' sense of school belonging.⁴²

Data from wellbeing measurement can also be harnessed to provide detailed analysis by gender, free school meal or SEN status, helping to target solutions for specific cohorts, where more universal interventions may be less likely to succeed. It might also help us better understand and address the root causes of the rise in exclusions by over 20% in 2023/24.⁴³

Given the measures in the Bill designed to boost school attendance, having a robust understanding of what is keeping young people out of school is crucial. National wellbeing measurement is therefore a key part of the solution.⁴⁴

Conclusion

A consistent national programme of children and young people's wellbeing measurement can be the mechanism by which this Bill delivers on its objective of improving the safeguarding, welfare and wellbeing of children and young people 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 central government with the data, analysis and insight it needs to improve both the delivery, and the evaluation, of national policies and programmes designed to benefit young people; and
- Clearly demonstrating to children and young people, and their parents, carers and teachers, that the government means what it says when it talks about being child-centred by putting young people's voices at the heart of decision making.

Amending the Bill to provide for a national wellbeing measurement programme will greatly increase the chances of this Bill driving improvements in the wellbeing of all children and young people in England. The amendment should secure commitment to the introduction of the programme, followed by the establishment of an expert time-limited working group for its design and delivery.



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