



THREE THOUSAND VOICES: GROWING UP IN SOUTH EAST LONDON



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FOREWORD

Dr Sam Parrett CBE

Group CEO, Elevare Civic Education Group



**I am proud to introduce Three Thousand Voices:
Growing up in South East London.**

This research has been undertaken on behalf of our new charity, the LASER Education Foundation. It is also the first report to be published by Elevare Civic Education Group – our organisation’s new name.

Comprising a Further Education College (London South East Colleges), a Multi Academy Trust (London South East Academies Trust) and our Charitable Foundation (LASER) – our Group is committed to listen to, understand and act upon the views of our children and young people.

And this report is an important milestone in our journey.

Across the UK, there is growing concern about the wellbeing of young people. International evidence from the OECD shows that children here are less likely to report high life satisfaction than their peers in other countries. This makes it vital that we understand the challenges and opportunities facing our learners – and respond with targeted, meaningful support.

Our Group Strategy for 2024–2030 sets out our ambition to transform lives through the power of learning. For learning to be truly transformative, our learners must feel safe, supported and empowered to thrive, both in and beyond the classroom.

That is why we developed the LASER Education Foundation: to increase our community reach and impact. This inaugural report, which shares the voices of 3,000 children and young people across our schools and college, will help us to achieve our aims.

Its findings are both encouraging and thought-provoking. Many of our learners report high levels of wellbeing, while others – particularly those with special educational needs or facing complex personal circumstances – have highlighted areas where they need greater support and guidance.

Above all, this report shows the importance of listening. Our learners’ voices must continue to guide our decisions and priorities.

I want to thank every child and young person who took part in this research and the colleagues who supported them to share their views so openly and honestly.

As we move forward, these insights will guide our work as a civic education group – ensuring that wellbeing is recognised as a foundation of education.

This report is the first stage of a journey – and is an invitation to join us. By working together with policymakers, local authorities, schools, colleges and community partners, our ambition is a longitudinal one.

With your support and challenge, we can ensure the voices of our young people continue to drive real change – shaping practice and policy to create a system that puts wellbeing at its heart and gives every child the chance to thrive.

Thank you for your interest and support.

Sam

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was conducted and the report written by Vivienne Avery and Isabel Celis in the Group Policy and Research team.

However, this research would not have been possible without support from a large number of people across our College and Schools to whom we are grateful.

Sam Parrett, our CEO, for the idea, and to our Deputy CEOs, Asfa Sohail and Neil Miller for supporting us to make it happen.

Over 3,000 learners who took part in the survey and those who participated in the in-depth interviews and workshops. Thanks for sharing your personal stories which brought the findings to life.

Staff in the College and Schools who encouraged their learners to complete the survey. This includes those who supported some learners on a 1:1 basis where they were not able to complete it on their own, especially in our AP and SEND schools and in the Nido Volans centres in the College.

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Nicole Runako our 2024-25 College Student Union President whose video encouraged learners to participate and reassured them they could trust us to protect their confidentiality when matching their survey responses to their management data.

Jane Webb and Simon Barker in the MIS team for support with management information, and to other members of the College Senior Leadership Team who helped to identify the courses with eligible students within the College.

Amy Perry, Chloe Tilling and Blatella Films for creating the videos of findings so that we could share these with staff and learners.

And finally, to the Children's Commissioner staff who carefully documented their research methodology so we were able to replicate it in our settings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Patterns of wellbeing

- There is a high degree of variability in wellbeing across our learners. Statistical modelling showed our learners can be grouped into six different groups with different wellbeing patterns. Around half our learners are in a 'high wellbeing' category.
- We have three groups of learners with low overall wellbeing, which make up almost 1 in 5 of our learners (19%). Learners from our Alternative Provision schools and those with EHCPs, especially in our SEND schools, were over-represented in these groups. The group with the lowest overall wellbeing feel unloved, unsupported and unsafe. Learners in this group were more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (College) or not to identify as male or female.

Home and family support

- While a large majority of our learners agreed they had somewhere to call home, and they lived with people who made them feel loved and cared for, learners from our College who were Looked After Children and learners from our SEND schools were less likely to agree.
- Learners who were less likely to agree that their families had everything they needed to support them included those who were Looked After Children, those who identified as LGBTQ+, College learners who are entitled to Free School Meals and those studying ESOL.
- Learners told us about how their families met their needs by providing for physical needs, listening to them, providing help, and teaching them right from wrong. However, challenging family circumstances were also spoken about, including being taken into local authority care, financial struggles, and difficulties being open about their gender or sexual identity.

Physical and mental health

- Just over half of learners in the Group agreed they had a healthy diet. The proportion who agreed generally declined as children got older and was lowest at the age of 15 years. They also acknowledged the benefits of exercise for a healthy lifestyle. They described how they enjoy engaging in a range of physical activities and sports.

- Learners of different ages described techniques they used to regulate their emotions including those taught in school, such as colour-codes for different emotions. Children and young people in our Alternative Provision school described how being able to better regulate their emotions in their current school was helping them to engage better with their education.
- Although 4/5 of learners agreed they had someone supportive to talk to, this dropped by 30% between the ages of 11 and 12/13 years, suggesting potential issues at this age. Learners in a range of schools talked about the benefits of having a supportive teacher to talk to when they needed.

Communities, friendships and safety

- Learners enjoyed many activities in their local area including a range of after school clubs and community activities, and younger learners enjoyed spending time outside e.g. at the park. Some learners said there was nothing to do in their area and places where they would socialise had closed.
- Overall, two-thirds of learners felt safe in their local area. Some learners shared experiences of feeling unsafe and strategies to deal with this such as being accompanied by family members. Others spoke about being aware of crime in their areas such as violence and drug-related crime but having learnt to 'look after' themselves.
- Learners were as likely to say they felt safe online as they did in their local area. There was a clear age gradient with only half of 6-year-olds saying they feel safe, whereas almost three-quarters of College learners agreed. Male learners were more likely than female learners to say they felt safe online. This gender gap was present from the age of 7 and upwards. Those who did not identify as male or female were least likely to say they felt safe.
- Learners spoke about how time spent online helped them make friends, socialise and connect to communities. Learners had various strategies for keeping safe including limiting accounts to friends and family, blocking offenders, ignoring abuse, or just spending less time online. Many knew other young people who had bad experiences online and others mentioned they sometimes not totally sure who they were talking to.
- Learners told us about the importance of their friendship groups, and loneliness experienced by those without many friends. Some learners told us about the impact of bullying on their wellbeing.

Education

- Students' experiences at school and college vary widely. Just over half of our learners said they enjoyed school or college but three-quarters agreed they had great teachers and lecturers. Younger learners were more likely to agree that they enjoyed school than older learners.
- Within the College there was a relationship between enjoyment and attendance. Those learners in the top attendance quintile were almost twice as likely to enjoy college as those in the bottom quintile.
- Many learners highlighted the positive influence of teachers/lecturers and other staff such as mentors, tutors and those in safeguarding roles who understand their needs and provide personalised support.
- The views of some learners in our schools were affected by negative experience of education in a previous mainstream school, which had led them to move into more specialist provision in our Trust. They told us how felt their current school was better at providing a supportive environment to cater for their needs and improve academic performance.
- When it came to plans for future jobs, learner perspectives highlight the optimism and the uncertainties that young people face as they plan their futures.
- Younger children often have imaginative and evolving career aspirations. Their ambitions are influenced by their changing interests and experiences, and do not seem to be yet permeated by the fears expressed by older students.
- Older learners recognised the importance of education and qualifications in achieving their goals. They are aware of the specific subjects and levels of education required for their career choices.
- Some older students have very concrete plans and are actively working towards their career goals. Some of our learners find their next career steps really challenging, despite aspiring for career pathways that are not out of the ordinary. This can be because their parents and role models have had more limited employment opportunities. Others express wider uncertainties and fear.

Opportunity, agency and empowerment

- Three in five of our learners agreed that they could make a difference to the things they cared about. Learners with EHCPs were more likely to agree than those without.
- Two-thirds of learners felt they were treated fairly. In addition, just over half of our learners agreed they had the same opportunities as other children. Learners with EHCPs, attending Alternative Provision schools, college learners with learning difficulties, college learners of mixed ethnicity, and those who were LGBTQ+ were less likely to agree.
- Learners mainly referred to influencing their immediate environments when discussing making a difference – often thinking of advice they provide to friends and siblings or being willing to help others. This understanding of their agency at a closer area of influence contrasts with the feelings of disempowerment that young people described when reflecting upon life situations that go beyond their control, even at a local level.
- Less than a fifth of learners agreed that the people running the country listened to their views. This was as low as 3% in some groups of College learners but 36% among those who were Looked After Children – potentially reflecting their contact with those in authority. Other Looked After Children described the difficulties they experienced in negotiating with local authorities about their home and school.
- Learners gave a range of examples outside the education system of where they felt they had been treated unfairly due to their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and special educational needs.

Recommendations for the LASER Education Foundation:

- The voices of our learners have highlighted a number of areas for programmes of support that can be developed through our LASER Education Foundation and other initiatives, such as our EDI Grants programme. These include:
 - **Support to develop friendships and reduce loneliness** – both the survey and qualitative research revealed that some groups of learners struggle with friendships, are lonely, and lacking supportive people to talk to.
 - **Mentoring** – some of our young learners would benefit from wider support and guidance outside their immediate family and friends to help with difficult and scary decisions, such as training and career choices, and to help navigate education.

- **Wider opportunities for enrichment** - many of our learners have limited opportunities for external activities and travel. Some rarely go outside their local area. This can be because of the nature of their family situation, financial struggles and personal needs which can make this challenging.
- **Support with physical health** - learners at the College would like to see more opportunities for physical activity across our range of campuses.
- **Support with mental health** - learners struggling with mental health or who knew others who were, wanted to more access to counselling and therapy to support them as well as better education on these issues.
- **Scholarships and wider financial support.** While the majority of our learners do not experience the level of poverty found in other some other areas of the country, significant numbers of our learners do have financial challenges that cannot be provided for by schools or the existing college bursary system.
- **Engagement in civic processes.** Although it is not surprising that learners are less likely to agree with statements about national leaders listening to their views, than being able to make a personal difference, the levels that we saw are concerning.

INTERPRETATION AND DEFINITIONS

Compared with other surveys of children, our survey has an older age profile as 50% of our responses were from our FE College.

All variation between figures described in the survey is based on differences which are statistically significant unless mentioned otherwise.

All groups reported separately are based on a minimum of 40 responses.

Due to differences in the qualitative research methodology, the depth of personal experiences gained from learners in our schools is greater compared to the broader overview collected from college learners, and most of the verbatim quotes in the report come from learners in our Trust schools.

School hub / provision types – our Education Group runs three types of schools (in addition to our FE College) – mainstream primary schools, schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and schools providing Alternative Provision. We did not have mainstream secondary schools in our education group at the time of the survey – our secondary schools were Alternative and SEND Provision schools.

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Refers to the needs of a child or young person in relation to their education. Some children with special educational needs are educated in mainstream schools and others are educated in schools that is solely for children with special educational needs.

EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan – a plan which is put in place by the relevant local authority to support a child or young person with special educational needs. The plan identifies each child's individual needs and sets out what additional support should be put in place to meet them.

'All those with EHCPs' – this category is used in our analysis based on college learners who are recorded as having an EHCP whether studying in specialist SEND provision or mainstream courses, and school learners attending a SEND school, where having an EHCP is a requirement. Some learners in our education group who have an EHCP but attend a mainstream school will be missing from this category, but the number will be small.

AP school– Alternative Provision schools - these provide education arranged by local authorities for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons are unable to access mainstream provision.

Looked After Child – a child who is in the care of the local authority. Children and young people in care may live with foster carers, friends or relatives, or in residential settings.

ESOL – English for Speakers of Other Languages. Our College has a number of courses for learners, including those below the age of 18, who need to learn English. ESOL learners may face various challenges beyond their English proficiency, as many of them are refugees or asylum seekers. Our survey included ESOL students aged 18 or under.

ALS – Additional Learning Support – a College service offering advice and support for all students with additional support needs such as dyslexia, autism, a physical impairment, mental health issues, a medical condition or support for learners referred because of weaknesses in English and/or maths.

LGBTQ+ - an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and includes a “+” to represent other sexual orientations and gender identities. It encompasses a diverse range of identities within the sexual and gender minority communities. For our research, we only had data on the sexual orientation of our College learners from management information, we did not have data for learners in our schools.

‘Learners who did not identify as male or female’ – this applies to learners in both our school and college who selected an answer category in the survey other than male and female in response to an age-appropriate gender question¹. Depending on the age of the child this used different categories in addition to male and female.

This includes those who selected ‘other’, ‘non-binary’ or ‘my gender is not listed’ depending on their age, as well as those who answered that they did not know their gender or preferred not to say. These groups were combined together because their answers to the wellbeing indicators were similar.

‘Lowest overall wellbeing’ this term is used in the report to refer to those whose overall wellbeing as scored by the indicators was in the bottom third for our Education Group.

‘Highest overall wellbeing’ refers to those whose scores were in the top third. Further information about the scoring method is available in Chapter 2.

¹ Ipsos (2023). Asking the UK their Gender: Inclusive survey design. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ipsos_%20Asking%20the%20UK%20their%20gender_June%202023.pdf [Accessed 2 February 2025]

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



There is increasing concern and policy focus on children's wellbeing in the UK. Evidence from the OECD shows that children in the UK are less likely to report high life satisfaction than other OECD countries².

This report contains the findings on the wellbeing of our children and young people in the Elevare Civic Education Group. It makes recommendations for priorities for programmes of support that we can provide through our charitable foundation.

The Elevare Civic Education Group

The Elevare Civic Education Group is a leading education provider which comprises London South East Colleges (LSEC) - a further and higher education provider across seven campuses in Bromley, Bexley, Greenwich and Lambeth; London South East Academies Trust (LSEAT) - a Multi-Academy Trust in Bromley, Bexley, Lambeth and Surrey; and a charity - the LASER Education Foundation (LASER).

Our 2024-2030 Group Strategy 'Transforming Lives Through the Power of Learning'³ seeks to change the lives of our learners and their communities for the better through education. In order to do this, we need to understand and support the overall wellbeing of our learners. As part of our Strategy, we set up LASER, to fund a range of research projects to improve outcomes for our children and young people in our schools and college⁴.

Research objectives

We conducted research to explore the wellbeing of the young learners in our education group. We wanted to ensure that our learners' voices influenced the development of programmes to be funded by LASER.

The objectives of our research were to:

- better understand our young learners' wider wellbeing and what they think is important
- ensure their voices shape priorities for support provided by LASER
- provide robust evidence of learner needs to support LASER fundraising

Research methodology

The research was conducted in February and March 2025 using a mixed method quantitative and qualitative approach. The research was based on the methods used by the Children's Commissioner for similar research conducted in 2024. We used this approach because it was already developed for the same range of education institutions and age groups as our learners so we could have confidence in its quality.

² OECD Child Well-being Dashboard | OECD - <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/oecd-child-well-being-dashboard.html>

³ Our Vision and Mission - <https://www.laseeg.co.uk/related-information/our-vision-and-mission>

⁴ LASER Education Foundation | charity - <https://www.lasereducation.org.uk/>

Learner wellbeing survey

An online survey was conducted by learners aged between 6 and 18 in eleven of our mainstream, Alternative Provision and SEND schools, and across six campuses in the College. College learners eligible for the survey included those up to the age of 19 if they were studying mainstream 16-19 funded courses, and up to the age of 24 for those studying at our specialist SEND provision, known as Nido Volans.⁵ The survey was conducted during lessons, lectures and tutorials.

Responses were received from 3,000 learners, roughly 50% across both the schools and the College. No attempt was made to calculate an exact response rate due to the complex nature of College provision and eligibility, but response was roughly 50% across our schools, and between 25-30% in the College.

The survey asked about learner views in relation to 15 different indicators of wellbeing, using the 'easy-read' version of the questionnaire developed for the Children's Commissioner survey below.⁶ Using the easy-read version enabled us to ask the same questions to all learners from those aged 6 in primary schools, to those studying ESOL in the College, and learners in most of our SEND schools.

- You feel like you can make a difference to the things you care about
- People who run the country listen to your views
- You are treated fairly
- You have the same opportunities as other children
- You have a healthy diet
- You have someone supportive to talk to
- You have somewhere to call home
- You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for
- You have great teachers/lecturers who support you
- You enjoy school/college
- Your family has everything they need to support you
- Your family gets to spend time together
- You feel safe online
- You feel safe in your local area
- You can do fun things near where you live
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your wellbeing?

All questions used the following answer categories 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', or 'don't know or prefer not to say'.

A 'visual' paper version of the questionnaire was designed using pictures to help explain the questions, to enable a wide range of our SEND learners to complete the survey with support from staff where needed. This can be found at Appendix 2.

⁵ One of our campuses is adult only and adult learners were not eligible for the survey except where specified above.

⁶ The Big Ambition - Have your say! -

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/09/TBAm_questionnaire_easyread_final.pdf

College learners completing the survey were asked to provide their student ID number so we could match their responses to personal characteristics data held in our management information. 75% of College learners provided this which significantly enriched the data to understand patterns of wellbeing reported here. Learners in our schools do not use an ID themselves and to minimise the burden on staff we decided against trying to apply one. In hindsight, the matched data for the College proved to be very insightful and if the survey was to be repeated, we recommend collecting names of school pupils to match data to MIS data for those in Trust schools too.

Qualitative research with learners

Alongside the survey, we conducted qualitative research aimed at providing nuance to children's understanding of their own wellbeing that complements the quantitative findings. These interviews and workshops gave us the opportunity to explore in more depth some of the areas of wellbeing covered in the survey, while allowing for other topics to emerge according to children's and young people's own perspectives.

We conducted 14 one-to-one, in-depth interviews with pupils in four Trust schools covering both primary and secondary, and mainstream, Alternative Provision and SEND schools. The interviews were semi-structured covering a range of wellbeing pillars adapted to learners' age. The interviews were conducted during the school day. Written or verbal consent was obtained in advance from parents and carers. Some interviews were supported by a school member of staff who acted as a trusted adult. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes.

Four participatory workshops were conducted with around 45 learners at four College campuses. These were structured around an initial activity aimed at identifying and discussing the emotions that learners associated with different areas of wellbeing, followed by an activity that encouraged them to propose interventions that they believed would support learners' wellbeing. Every workshop was jointly facilitated by two members of the Group Policy and Research Team, with support from a member of the Student Engagement team, who also played a key role in recruiting participants. Each session lasted around 45 minutes.



CHAPTER 2

HIGH AND LOW WELLBEING



Key findings

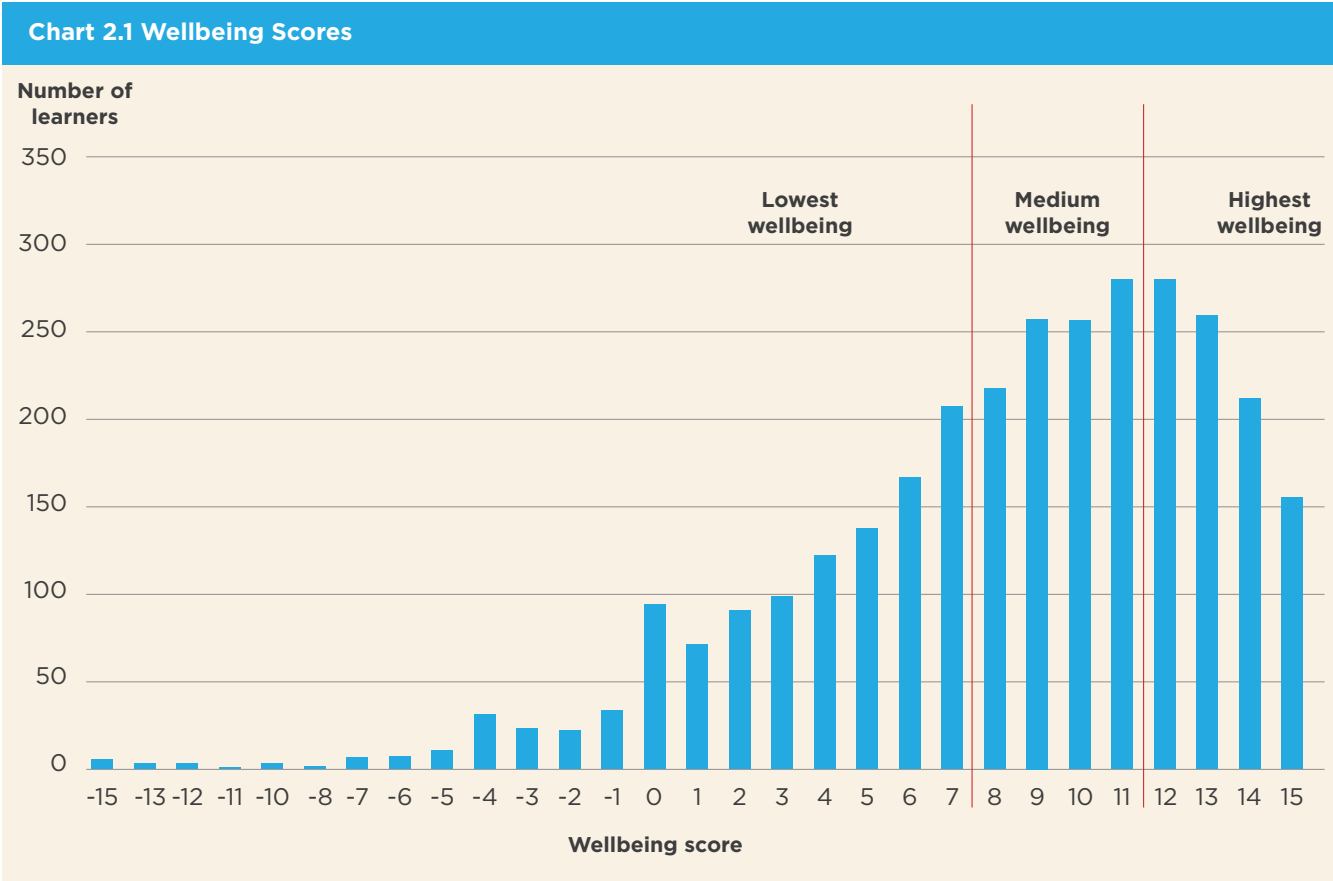
- There is a high degree of variability in wellbeing across our learners.
- Overall, learners are more likely to have high wellbeing, agreeing on average with 11 of the 15 statements.
- But some learners have very low wellbeing and disagreed with all 15 of the statements.
- Using statistical modelling showed our learners can be grouped into six different groups with different wellbeing patterns.
- Around half our learners are in a 'high wellbeing' category. Learners in this group can be found throughout the Trust schools and College but those from our mainstream primary schools, those attending school in an area of low disadvantage, and College learners who belong to the main religions were over-represented in this group.
- But we have three groups of learners with low overall wellbeing which make up almost 1 in 5 of our learners (19%).
 - One group with low overall wellbeing is characterised by a feeling that they are unfairly treated (9% of our learners). Learners from our Alternative Provision schools were over-represented in this group and the qualitative research demonstrated the impact of their experience and exclusion from mainstream school. However, this group included a range of other learners from our schools and College too.
 - A second group comprising 5% of our learners is characterised by having low overall wellbeing, lacking supportive people to talk to and not feeling loved and cared for, but still trying to make a positive difference to the things they cared about. Learners with EHCPs, especially in our SEND schools were over-represented in this group.
 - The group with the lowest overall wellbeing (comprising 5% of our learners) felt unloved, unsupported and unsafe both locally and online. Learners in this group were more likely to be from the College or an AP/SEND school and were more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (College) or not to identify as male or female.

Using the wellbeing indicator data to provide a sense of overall wellbeing

We found a high degree of variability in wellbeing across our learners from their responses to both the survey and the qualitative research. We wanted to get a sense of their overall wellbeing and to better understand the different patterns in wellbeing across our diverse range of learners using the different pillars in the questionnaire (such as health, community and family).

To look at overall wellbeing, we used a simple scoring system based on agreement or disagreement with each indicator. While this does not provide an academically verified measure of wellbeing, it did provide a comprehensive measurement. A score was calculated for each individual learner scoring +1 for each wellbeing statement they agreed with, and -1 for each statement they disagreed with. No points were given for those who answered, ‘neither agree nor disagree’ or ‘don’t know or prefer not to say’. This gave a potential range of scores for each individual from -15 (if the learner disagreed with all the statements) to +15 (if they agreed with all the statements).

The scored data was positively skewed towards higher wellbeing scores, although there were learners who disagreed with all or nearly all 15 statements showing the extreme range of wellbeing across our Group. Using a modal average, learners were most likely to agree with 11 of the 15 statements.



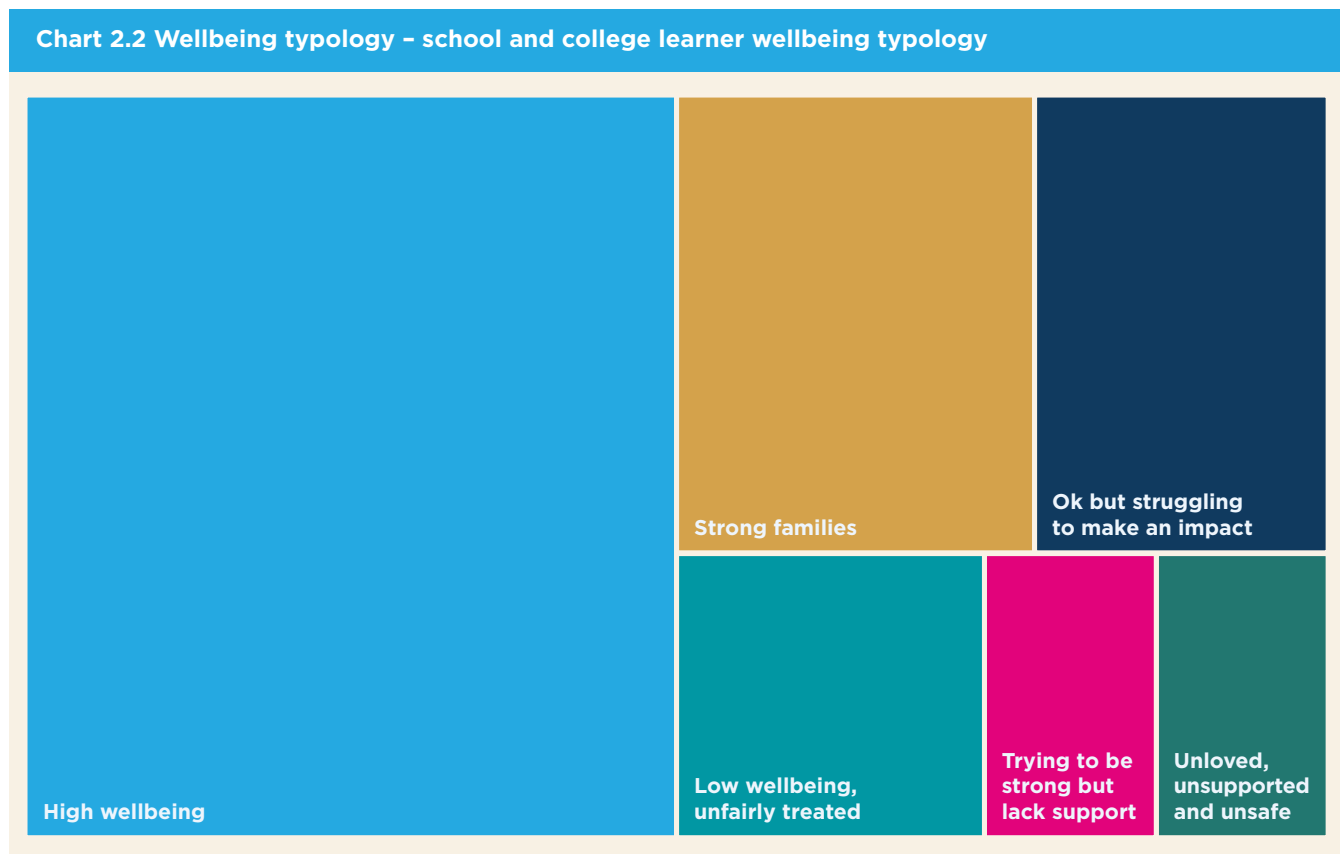
A typology of wellbeing

Using descriptive analysis, it was difficult to distinguish characteristics which were associated with high or low wellbeing. Learners with both high and low wellbeing are found in all different levels and curriculum areas of the College and in all schools, across all single years of age, and with a full range of other personal characteristics.

In order to better understand how our levels of wellbeing vary across our Group we carried out statistical modelling using a technique called 'Latent class analysis' which is used to uncover hidden subgroups within a wider population.⁷ This allowed us to create a wellbeing typology from the survey responses. The statistical model used 7 of the 15 indicators, removing those that were strongly correlated with each other.⁸

The analysis identified six classes of wellbeing presented in the data. These are presented in Chart 2.2. The groups are distinguished by both different levels of wellbeing and also differences in their agreement with specific questions.

Chart 2.2 Wellbeing typology – school and college learner wellbeing typology



⁷ Understanding Latent Class Analysis (LCA) | by Ramdhan Hidayat | Medium – <https://medium.com/@ramdhanhdy/understanding-latent-class-analysis-lca-14ffccc885e7>

⁸ The indicators used in the final model were 'You can make a difference to the things you care about', 'You are treated fairly', 'You have someone supportive to talk to', 'You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for', 'You have great teachers/lecturers who support you', 'Your family gets to spend time together', 'You feel safe in your local area'

The largest group representing half our learners have **high wellbeing**. This group had high levels of agreement across all or almost all 15 indicators. This group were found in all schools/college courses, and single years of age. They were slightly more likely to attend a mainstream primary school, to live in or attend a school in an area of low deprivation, and for College learners for whom the data was available, to belong to the main religions. Learners from our specialist SEND provision, Nido Volans, were also more likely to be represented in this group.

The next largest group, **‘Strong families’** represent 17% of our learners. These learners had the same high levels of agreement with the questions about families and also to say they had great teachers, but agreement with the other questions was lower than the ‘High wellbeing’ group. This group were slightly more likely to be from mainstream and Alternative Provision schools than SEND schools or the College.

‘OK but struggling to make an impact’. Fourteen per cent of learners were in a group with mid-levels of wellbeing. They were slightly more likely to be at the College than in school, and to live in a deprived area (or if at school, to attend a school in a deprived area). Learners in the College were more likely to be of White or Mixed ethnicity than other groups. One of the distinguishing factors about this group was having lower levels of agreement than most other groups with the statements that they could make a difference to the things they care about, and that they had great teachers.

There were three groups with relatively low wellbeing, who were quite distinct from each other.

‘Low wellbeing, unfairly treated’. 9% of learners had lower levels of agreement with most indicators than the previous three groups and were much less likely than these groups to agree they were fairly treated. They were spread across schools and the College but slightly more likely to be attending an AP school (see later in the report for AP school learners experiences of mainstream school). They were also slightly more likely to be female or not to identify as male or female. They were also more likely to live in a deprived area.

‘Trying to be strong but unsupported’ 5% of our learners were in this group. They were more likely to have an EHCP and to attend a SEND school. They had high levels of agreement that they could make a difference to the things they cared about and were likely to agree that they feel safe online and in their local area. But they were less likely to agree they are loved and cared for and that they have someone supportive to talk to.

‘Unloved, unsupported and unsafe’ The final 5% of our learners were doing the least well of all groups. They had very low levels of agreement to the wellbeing statements, and were unlikely to agree they were loved and cared for, had someone supportive to talk to and felt safe in their local area or online. Learners in this group were more likely to be from the College or an AP/SEND school, and were more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (College) or not to identify as male or female.

Many of the characteristics identified here can be seen also in the subsequent presentation and discussion of the individual aspects of wellbeing.



CHAPTER 3

FAMILY, CARE AND HOME



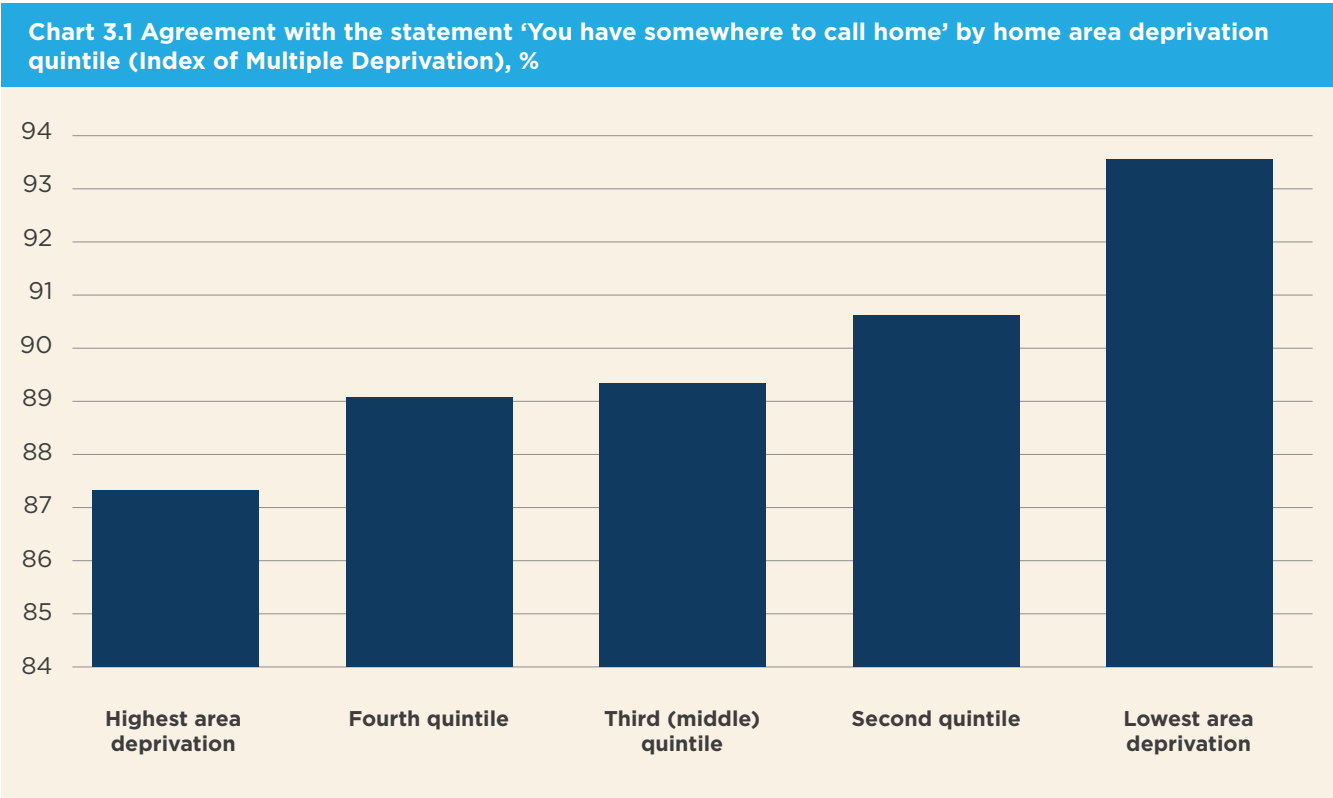
Key findings

- Although 86% of our learners agreed they had somewhere to call home, learners from our College who were Looked After Children were less likely to agree (73%) as were learners from SEND schools (76%). Some of our SEND schools have a high proportion of Looked After Children.
- Eighty seven percent of learners said they lived with people who made them feel loved and cared for. Learners from SEND schools were less likely to agree than learners from other schools (77%).
- Learners who were less likely to agree that their families had everything they needed to support them included those who were Looked After Children, those who were LGBTQ+, College learners entitled to Free School Meals and those studying ESOL.
- Learners told us about how their families met their needs by providing for physical needs, listening to them, providing help, and teaching them right from wrong.
- Learners told us about challenging family circumstances which included being taken into local authority care, financial struggles, and difficulties with being open about their gender or sexual identity with their families.
- Our learners appreciated time spent with their families especially playing together, outings, and get-togethers with extended family. Learners who expressed sadness that they couldn't spend more time with their families included those who had been bereaved, those whose parents worked long hours and those who did not see parents or siblings as often as they would like due to divorce.

You have somewhere to call home

Overall, 86% of learners agreed they had somewhere to call home. This was higher for the College than for School learners. Learners from SEND schools were less likely to agree (76%) than learners from mainstream and Alternative Provision, and a high proportion of these learners said they didn't know or preferred not to say (18%). We know that quite a high proportion of learners at some of our SEND schools are Looked After Children which might explain this. Within the College, Looked After Children were significantly less likely to agree they had somewhere to call home – only 73% agreed compared with 90% for the College as a whole.

Other groups who were less likely to agree they had somewhere to call home included those with the lowest overall wellbeing, College learners who did not identify as male or female, and those living in areas with the highest area deprivation (88%).



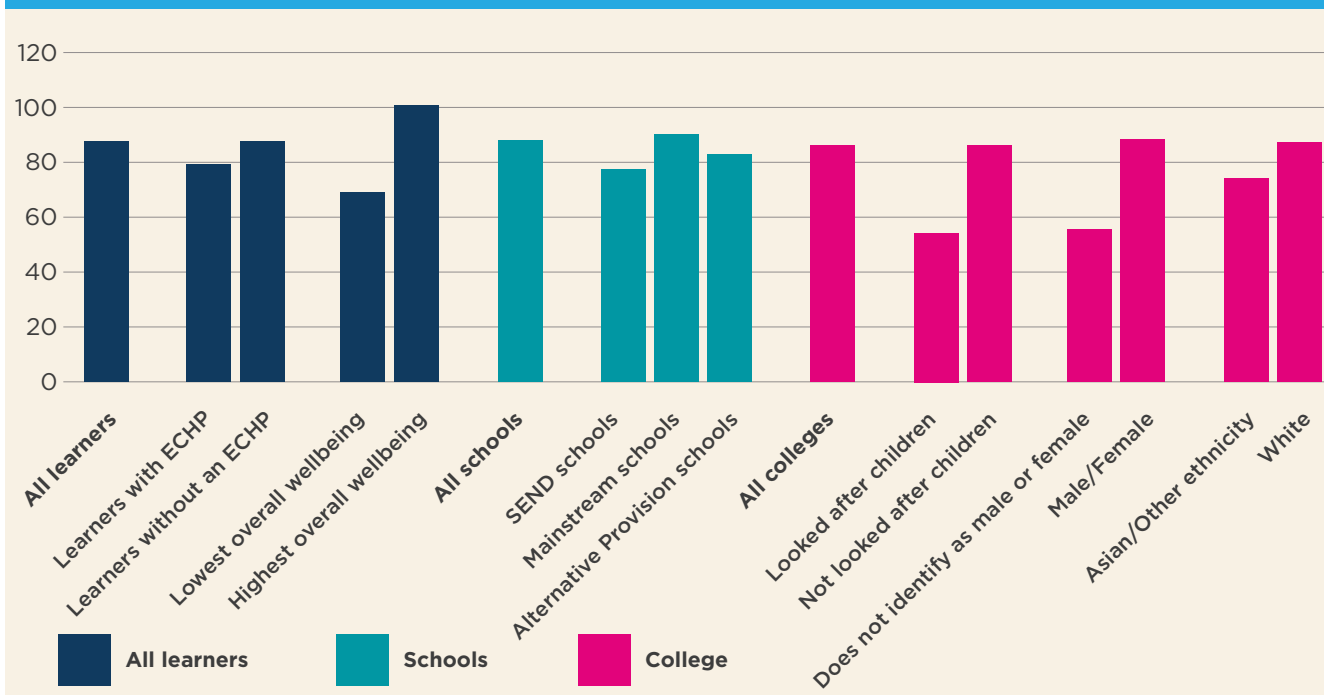
You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for

Eighty seven percent of learners said they lived with people who made them feel loved and cared for. Learners with an EHCP were significantly less likely to agree (79%). There was no difference between learners in school or at the College, but this did vary between schools, with learners from SEND schools less likely to agree than learners from other schools (77%).

Other groups who were less likely to agree they felt loved and cared for were:

- College learners who were Looked After Children (54%)
- College learners who did not identify as male or female (55%) or who were LGBTQ+ (67%)
- College students whose ethnicity was Asian (74%) or Other (74%)
- Those with the lowest overall wellbeing (69%)

Chart 3.2 Agreement with the statement 'You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for' by selected groups, %



Emotional support from family members is a crucial aspect of wellbeing for many of our students. When prompted about the kind of things that made her feel supported by her family, this young student explained: ***“Just love, just being there for you. They always help [my siblings and me] wherever we need, if we need anything of them. And how to help ourselves when we’re older or what we want to do in life. And knowing the right or wrong”***

Another student explained what having a supporting family meant for him: ***“they bring food to the table and listen to me when I need it – that’s all I can ask for”***

Young people in the College discussed the wide variation in experiences based on individual family dynamics and circumstances. Learners with more positive family experiences felt ***“safe and loved”*** at home and stated: ***“I am happy when I’m at home.”*** Other learners explained that thinking about their families made them sad because ***“everyone shouts at each other”*** or annoyed because ***“my family keep telling my mistakes and comparing me to others.”***

Another learner who is transitioning from male to female wrote in a red note: *“telling your family that you are transgender.”* In the workshops’ methodology, red notes were used to express intense emotions such as annoyed, furious, mad, terrified and angry.

Your family has everything they need to support you

While some of our children and young people feel well-supported, others face significant challenges that negatively affect their wellbeing. The things that learners referred to, that some families lacked, included both physical resources and struggles with money, and also emotional support.

Overall, 82% of learners agreed that their families had everything they needed to support them. Learners with the lowest overall wellbeing were less likely to agree (59%, compared with 99% of those with the highest wellbeing) as were those who did not identify as male or female (72%).

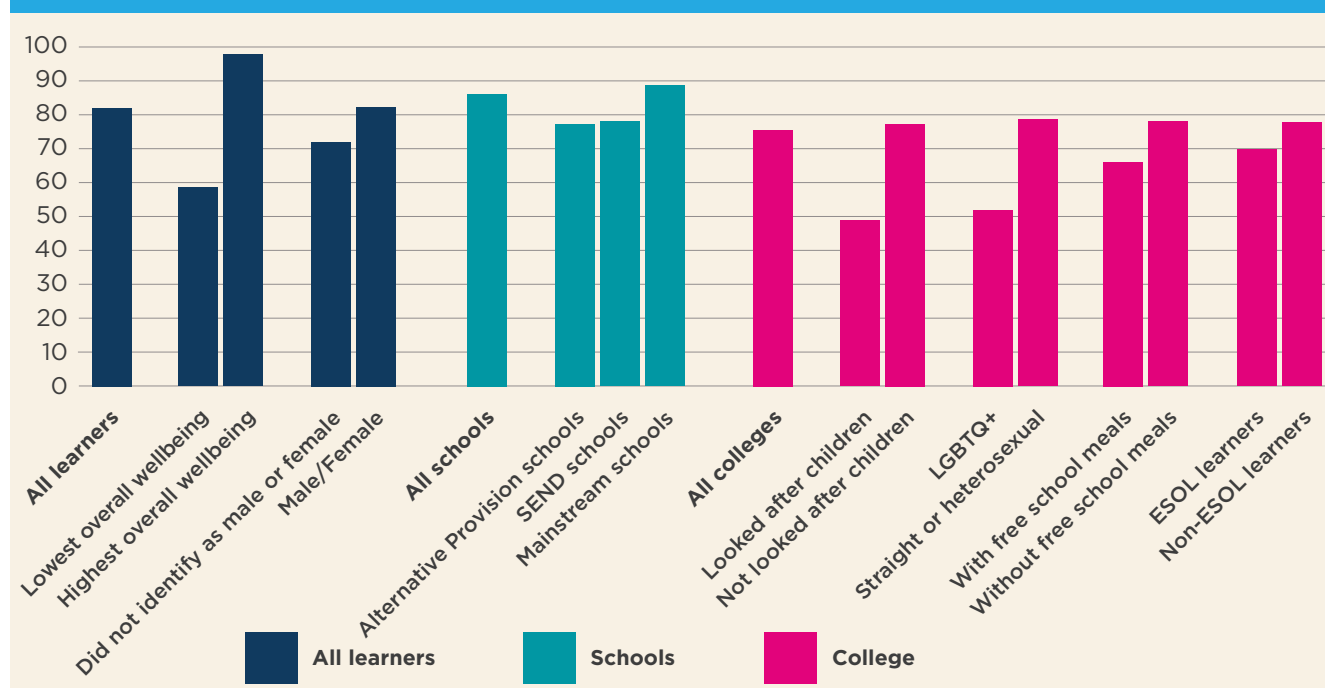
Learners in schools were more likely to agree than in the College (84% compared with 76%), but the proportion for learners at SEND and AP schools was lower than for mainstream schools (77% and 78% respectively compared with 89%).

Other College learners who were less likely to agree were:

- Learners who are Looked After Children (49%)
- Learners who identified as LGBTQ+ (52%)
- Those entitled to Free School Meals (66%)
- Learners studying ESOL (70%)

College learners who live in the least deprived areas (least deprived quintile) were more likely to agree (84%) than those living in the other quintiles.

Chart 3.3 Agreement with the statement ‘Your family has everything they need to support you’ by selected groups, %



For some, difficult family situations contribute to a feeling of instability and limited control over their lives. One young man spoke about the circumstances that led to him being taken into care and reflected on the difficulty of navigating this at a young age. He had to change carers and schools multiple times while waiting for a care placement and then his carer died after an illness.

The challenges faced by looked after children was also raised by young college learners who recommended improved **“support [for] foster homes.”** We were able to gain an insight into the experiences of young people in foster homes through a student who expressed their excitement that their family will be fostering their best friend permanently. They described being used to a busy, shared environment, which has helped them cope with the lack of privacy that can come with foster care.

“The only reason why I might be OK with it is because my sister used to have so many mates come around the house and sleep over and stuff. Her friend stayed all through year 11. I’m used to having different people in the house; not just in the house, in the room”

Many young learners also described the financial struggles their families face. College learners raised the need to **“focus on family background so if a family is poor [provide] more support”** and **“creating a safe space where students can talk about [family issues].”** Some of these young people described the trade-offs faced by low-income families, and how these challenges are compounded by overlapping disadvantages that affect young learners’ future prospects:

“We’ve been living on benefits for god knows how long. My disability money goes to pay the bills. The disability money, the carers allowance; prices are just going up. Even if you do get a job, there’s benefits and consequences of that, you will lose benefits. With my dad not being around as well, it’s tough”

As well as financial struggles, other learners reflected how their families were not able to support them because they did not have a good enough understanding or appreciation of their gender or sexual identity. They wanted their families to be better educated on these topics so they that could provide more support.

Your family gets to spend time together

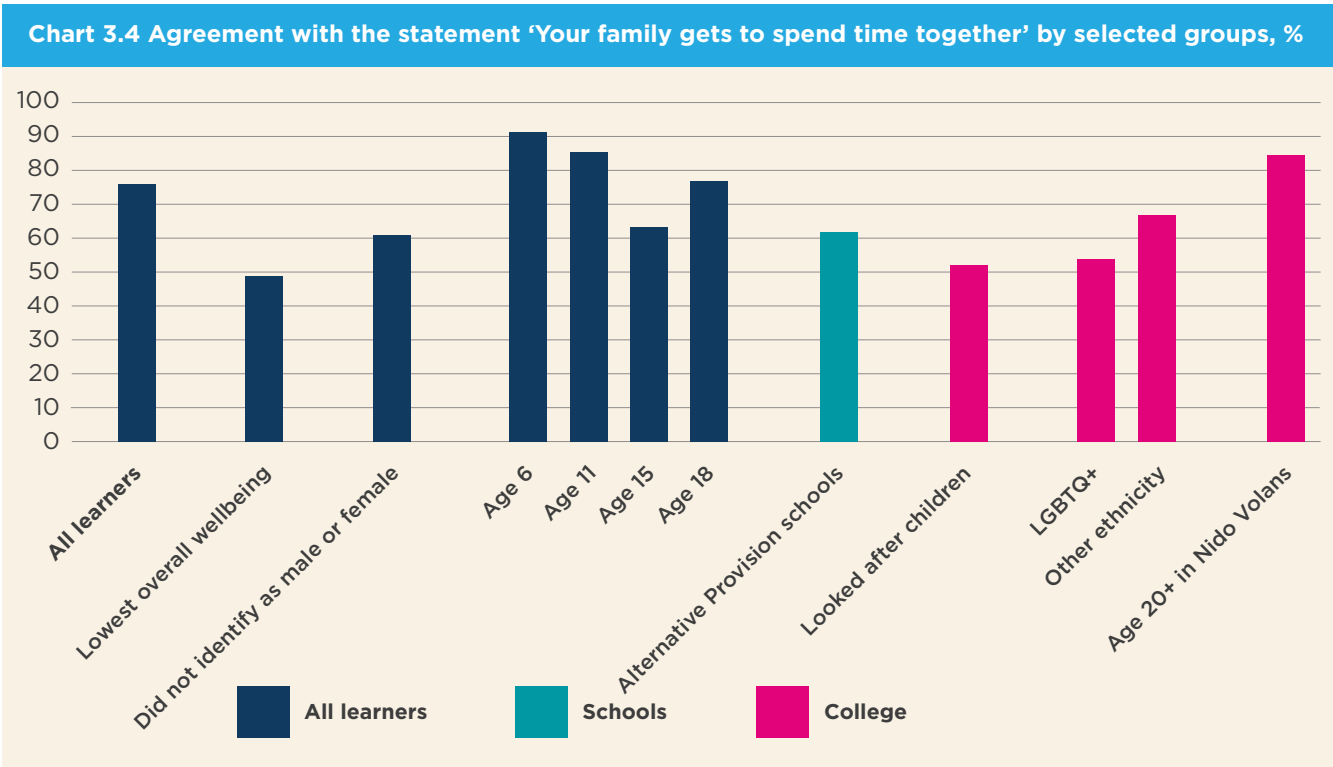
Overall, 76% of learners agreed that their family gets to spend time together. There was no difference overall between school and College learners, although learners studying in Alternative Provision schools were less likely to agree (61%).

Other groups who were less likely to agree followed a similar pattern to other indicators of family life:

- College learners who are Looked After Children (46%)
- College learners who were LGBTQ+ (53%) or who did not identify as male or female (60%)
- College learners from the 'Asian' and 'Other' ethnic groups (70% and 66%)
- Those with the lowest overall wellbeing (48%)

By age, 6 and 11-year-olds were most likely to agree that their family gets to spend time together, along with College learners studying in Nido Volans who were aged 20 and above. Learners aged 14 and 15 were less likely to agree.

There was no relationship with having an EHCP, or for College learners, by area deprivation or receipt of Free School Meals.



The way families spend time together varied by age groups and family circumstances. Children and young people value the time spent with their families, whether it is through regular routines or special outings.

“I like playing with my sister and I like my mum and dad because they give me really good cuddles”

“A lot of the time I’ll spend arguing with [my sister] because we argue a lot. Then some of the time it will be spent playing Uno with my dad and other games. And my mum, I normally play on her phone but not loads. We sometimes watch TV or we watch a family film together”

“Summer time, when my dad would go where he grew up in Peckham and all his friends go, they have a little BBQ, obviously we’d go with my sisters”

Some learners told us that they would like to spend more time with their families than they currently do because their parents are divorced, or because their parents work long shifts or are too tired at weekends to spend time together.

“My mum and dad are divorced it’s really hard for me. My dad is always at work but not on Sundays, and my mum I get meetings but not a lot and I don’t get a lot of time with my family together”

Older learners told us that they do not spend much time with their families or the people they live with. This sometimes had to do with living arrangements, such as in cases where learners have siblings living with relatives in other parts of the country or where they do not live with one of their parents but visit them from time to time.

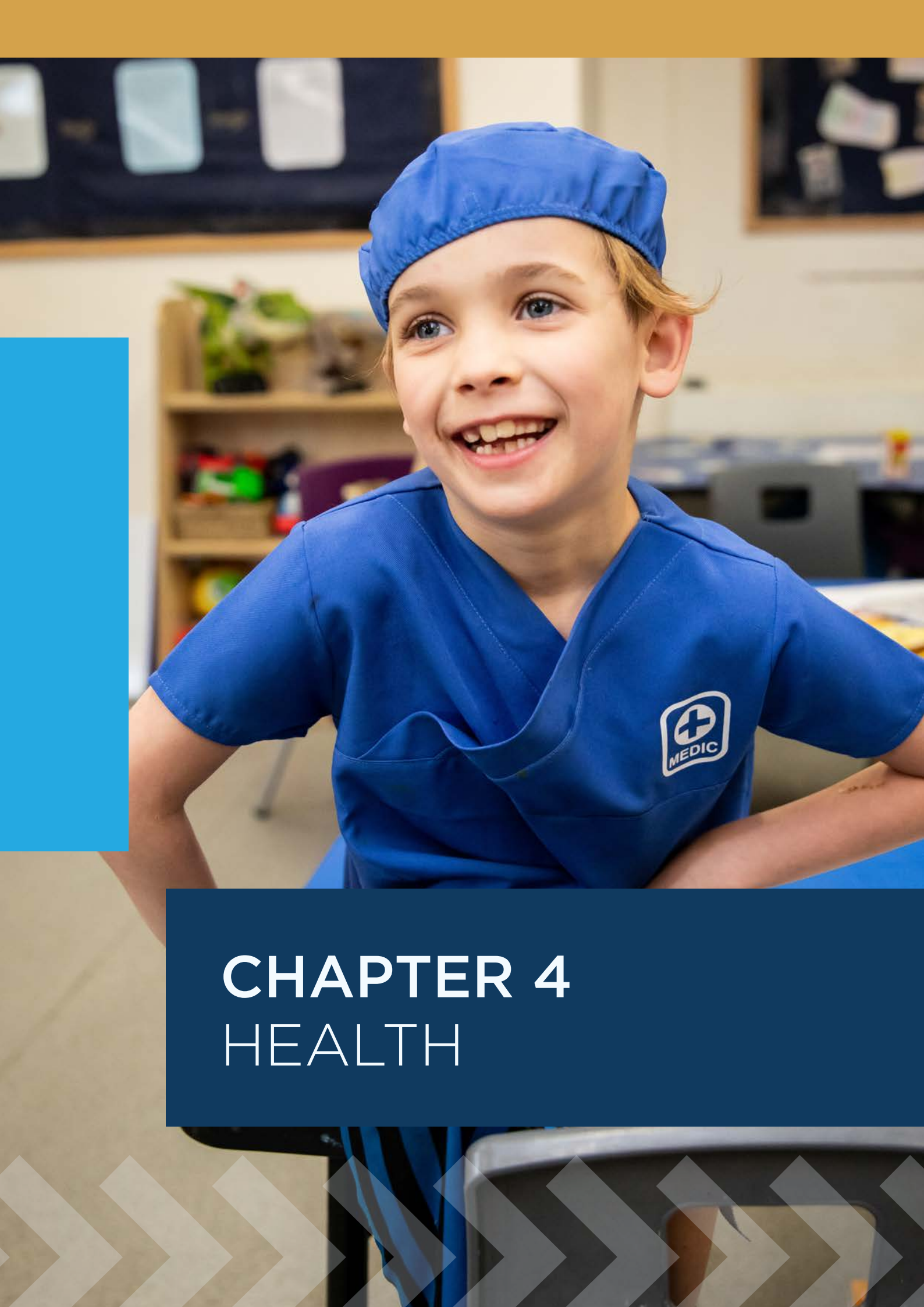
“My little sister lives with my great aunt. I see them maybe every fortnight or weekend I’ll go down to Hastings. Not as much as I’d like, but obviously the distance is quite a lot. It is what it is, can’t change it”

Children and young people have varying perspectives on spending time with family, with some expressing a desire for more family connection, while others feel it has little impact on their wellbeing. For some, relationships with friends or other family members are more central to their sense of support. When asked if he would like to spend more time with his grandparents, who are also his carers, one 16-year-old simply responded: **“I’m not really bothered.”** Another boy in a similar living arrangement described his routine after school:

"I don't really spend time with my nan and grandad. Well, I do, but I don't because every day, when I go home, I just go straight to my room. I just sit in my room for the rest of the night"

For bereaved students, the loss of a parent or other family member has had an important impact to their wellbeing. When prompted about what made him feel better when feeling sad or upset, this young man said: ***"I just think of my Dad, when we used to playfight"***. This was also mentioned by a College learner who was going through a bereavement.





CHAPTER 4

HEALTH

Key findings

- Just over half (56%) of learners in the Group agreed they had a healthy diet. The proportion who agreed generally declined as children got older and so was higher in our schools than the College, and higher in primary than secondary schools.
- Learners were least likely to agree they had a healthy diet at the age of 15.
- There was no relationship between learner agreement that they had a healthy diet and those learners who were entitled to Free School Meals or lived a deprived area (College learners).
- Learners made clear links between healthy eating habits and wider wellbeing.
- They also acknowledged the benefits of exercise for a healthy lifestyle. They described how they enjoy engaging in a range of physical activities and sports.
- When discussing their mental health, learners of different ages described techniques they used to regulate their emotions including those taught in school, such as colour-codes for different emotions.
- Children and young people in our Alternative Provision schools described how being able to better regulate their emotions in their current school was helping them to engage with education in a way that they had been prevented from doing at their previous mainstream schools.
- Almost 4/5 (78%) of learners agreed they had someone supportive to talk to. This was higher at younger ages with a large difference of around 30% between 11-year-olds and 12-13-year-olds, suggesting potential issues at this age such as the transition from primary to secondary school, or puberty.

Healthy diet and healthy lifestyle

Fifty-six percent of learners in the Group agreed they had a healthy diet. This was higher in the schools than the College (63% compared with 50%). There was generally higher agreement at primary school ages (6-11) and lower agreement at secondary ages (11-18). Pupils in Alternative Provision schools were more likely to disagree that they had a healthy diet (25%) than those in mainstream and SEND schools. (7% and 13%).

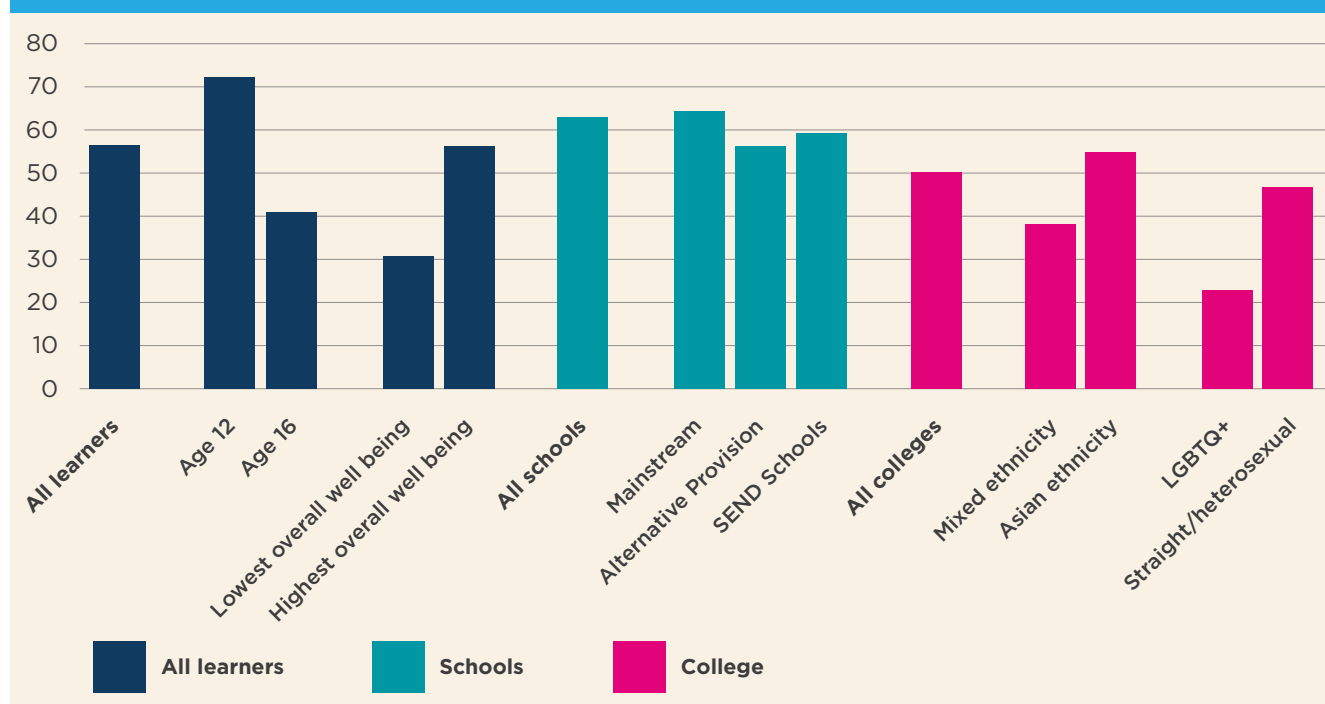
The age at which learners were most likely to say they had a healthy diet was age 12 (72%) and they were least likely to agree with this at age 16 (41%). There was no significant difference by gender.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was no significant variation between those College learners entitled to Free School Meals and those who were not, or by area deprivation where learners lived.

Learners with low overall wellbeing were less likely to agree they had a healthy diet (31%). Only 23% College learners who identified as LGBTQ+ agreed.

There was no significant difference between learners with an EHCP and those without one.

Chart 4.1 Agreement with the statement 'You have a healthy diet' by selected groups, %



The qualitative research exposed how learners tended to mention the need to cut down on sweets and chocolate, rather than looking at the health of their overall diet, though some did discuss the importance of including fruit and vegetables. They recognised the benefits of healthy eating habits in maintaining their overall wellbeing.

“Next week [in class] we’re gonna make our own healthy cake. I wanted it to be a chocolate cake. But chocolate cakes aren’t good for you, because chocolate isn’t good for you”

“I do workout, I do have a dumbbell. Could be better. Could eat like, healthier and stuff. But I do like my fruits”

Young people in the College talking about the LASER Education Foundation mentioned that they would like to have access to healthier food options in their campuses.

Learners acknowledged the benefits of exercise for a healthy lifestyle. Learners of all ages described how they enjoy engaging in a range of physical activities, such as running, football, swimming, taekwondo, climbing or going to the gym. However, access to many of these activities is mediated by their family contexts, with some from the more privileged backgrounds and with more supportive family environments enjoying very active lives outside of school.

When reflecting about elements of a healthy lifestyle, a young man aged 17, who has been in care for over five years, described the ways in which he ensures he maintains good mental health. However, when asked about physical health he said: ***“that’s really it, to be honest. Just make sure my hygiene is good.”*** While he did mention doing regular exercise, he highlighted the importance of physical activities in emotional regulation. He described how he started climbing to release anger: ***“Climbing was a getaway and obviously, with ADHD, you burn that energy off and it makes you think straight”***

Young learners with medical conditions, expressed their concerns about barriers in accessing treatment. In workshops with College students, one student also mentioned that there was a need for, ***“ensuring students can receive medication on-site by a nurse when they are quite sick.”***

As well as access to more healthy food in the College, a common suggestion from the College participatory workshops for support from LASER was that learners would like an on-site gym to use. Currently there is one at Bromley but none at other sites. A number of schools also have gyms.

The importance of mental health

Children and young people in our Education Group are increasingly aware of the importance of mental health and the link between physical and mental health.

Our schools play a key role in providing learners with the knowledge and skills to regulate their emotions. For instance, some primary schools use colour-coded systems to give learners the vocabulary they need to be able to interpret and communicate their emotions. Learners referred to this among different techniques they have learned to regulate their emotions.

"I like playing in my local tennis centre because it keeps me in my green zone and it keeps me active"

"If I'm under pressure, sometimes I'll hold my breath for five seconds, squeeze my hands, hold my breath for another five seconds, and then I'll feel OK. I think I learned it from our PSHE teacher"

Older students in our specialist and Alternative Provision settings also told us they have recently developed skills to regulate their emotions whereas their inability to do this had caused them trouble in their previous mainstream settings. For instance, a 15-year-old pupil shared how drawing has become a crucial technique for zoning out and regulate their emotions, a practice they were unable to explore in their mainstream school in the past due to strict rules: ***"I was not allowed to take time outs, I wasn't allowed to take minutes out, I wasn't allowed to go to the toilet, I wasn't allowed to do anything at that school."*** This pupil described their previous tendency to lash out and how the new environment has significantly improved their ability to manage emotions: ***"It's like it's not making me mad to the point where I can't sleep at night. It doesn't get underneath my skin too bad, I can regulate myself with about 5-10 minutes."***

Others have found different strategies outside of school that help them regulate their emotions and boost their wellbeing.

"I have this mindfulness, squishy PS 5 controller. It's basically like a real controller, it has the joysticks and stuff, but they're all squishy. And then you can squish it until you feel better"

A 16-year-old female learner reflected on her journey towards happiness and self-acceptance. She noted that as she gets older, she feels happier and less worried about fitting in or what others think: ***"Before I didn't really feel happy all the time, but I feel so much better in myself getting older and looking forward to more things."***

Some young people who participated in workshops reported having poor mental health. Young people wrote different comments to express difficult emotions related to how they feel about their appearance, including **“body dysmorphia”** and **“how body looks.”** Some young women made reference to insecurities about their bodies and dealing with eating disorders. A young learner who identifies as non-binary referred to not feeling comfortable with the way their body looks.

Someone supportive to talk to

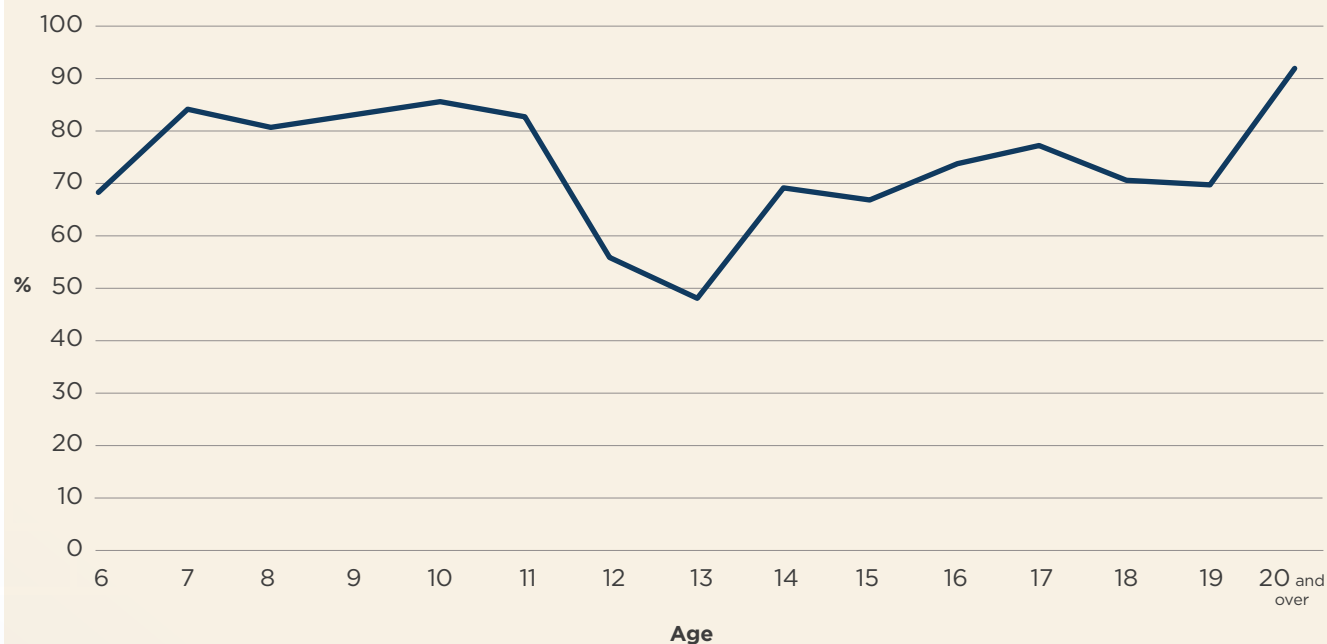
Having someone to talk to is crucial for children’s and young people’s wellbeing, and the survey asked whether learners agreed that they had someone supportive to talk to. In total, 78% of our Group learners agreed that they did. This was slightly higher in schools than in the College (81% compared with 75%).

Agreement was correlated with age, with a high level of agreement at primary school age before a large dip of around 30% in the proportion who agree with the statement at the ages of 12 and 13. This is likely to be linked to the transition from primary to secondary school when friendships and relationships with primary school staff may be lost.⁹ The level of agreement then climbs again from the age of 14 but does not reach previous levels, except for SEND College students aged 20 and over in Nido Volans.

Learners from our SEND schools were least likely to agree (69%) where 1/5 of these learners said they didn’t know or would prefer not to say. 75% of learners in Alternative Provision agreed, but 1/10 said they disagreed (i.e. they did not have a supportive person to talk to). 85% of learners at mainstream schools agreed they did have someone supportive to talk to.

Learners who did not identify as male or female were less likely to agree they had someone supportive to talk to (48%). Learners with an EHCP were slightly less likely to agree across our schools and college as a whole compared to those who didn’t (71%) but 92% of such learners with an EHCP in specialist provision at the College did agree. College learners who were Looked After Children were also less likely to agree (56%).

⁹ We considered whether this finding could reflect the specialist provision of our secondary schools compared to our primary schools, but the size of this drop at ages of 12 and 13 is far larger than the differences we see between our mainstream and specialist provision.

Chart 4.2 Percentage who agree with the statement 'You have someone supportive to talk to' by single year of age

Learners taking part in the qualitative research reported having close relationships with their family, friends and teachers/staff as people they could talk to. A pupil, aged 16, shared how talking to someone, especially his sisters, helps him when he is not feeling good about something. Younger learners also mentioned they can talk to teachers if there are any issues or something is worrying them.

Recommendations from College students to improve learner wellbeing using LASER funding included mental health counselling and online resources to address a range of issues including sexuality, loneliness and friendships.



CHAPTER 5

COMMUNITY AND LOCAL AREA



Key findings

- Overall, two-thirds of learners felt safe in their local area with no significant difference between learners at our schools and the College. College learners who lived in more deprived areas were no more likely to feel unsafe than those living in areas of less deprivation.
- Some learners shared experiences of feeling unsafe in their area and strategies to deal with this such as being accompanied by family members. Others spoke about being aware of crime in their areas such as violence and drug-related crime but having learnt to 'look after' themselves.
- Learners enjoyed many clubs and community activities in their local area, and younger learners enjoyed spending time at the park and in the library. Some said there was nothing to do in their area and places where they would socialise had closed.
- Learners were equally likely to say they felt safe online as they did in their local area (two thirds of learners felt safe). There was a clear age gradient to feelings of safety online with only half of 6-year-olds saying they feel safe, whereas almost three-quarters of College learners agreed.
- There was a gender gap in agreement about safety online where males were more likely to say they felt safe than females from the age of 7 and upward. Those who did not identify as male or female were least likely to say they felt safe.
- Learners spoke about how time spent online helped them make friends, socialise and connect to communities. But many knew other young people who had bad experiences online.
- Learners had various strategies for keeping safe online including limiting accounts to friends and family, blocking offenders, ignoring abuse, or just spending less time online. Some see abuse as inevitable.
- Learners told us about the importance of their friendship groups, and in some cases about being lonely without many friends.

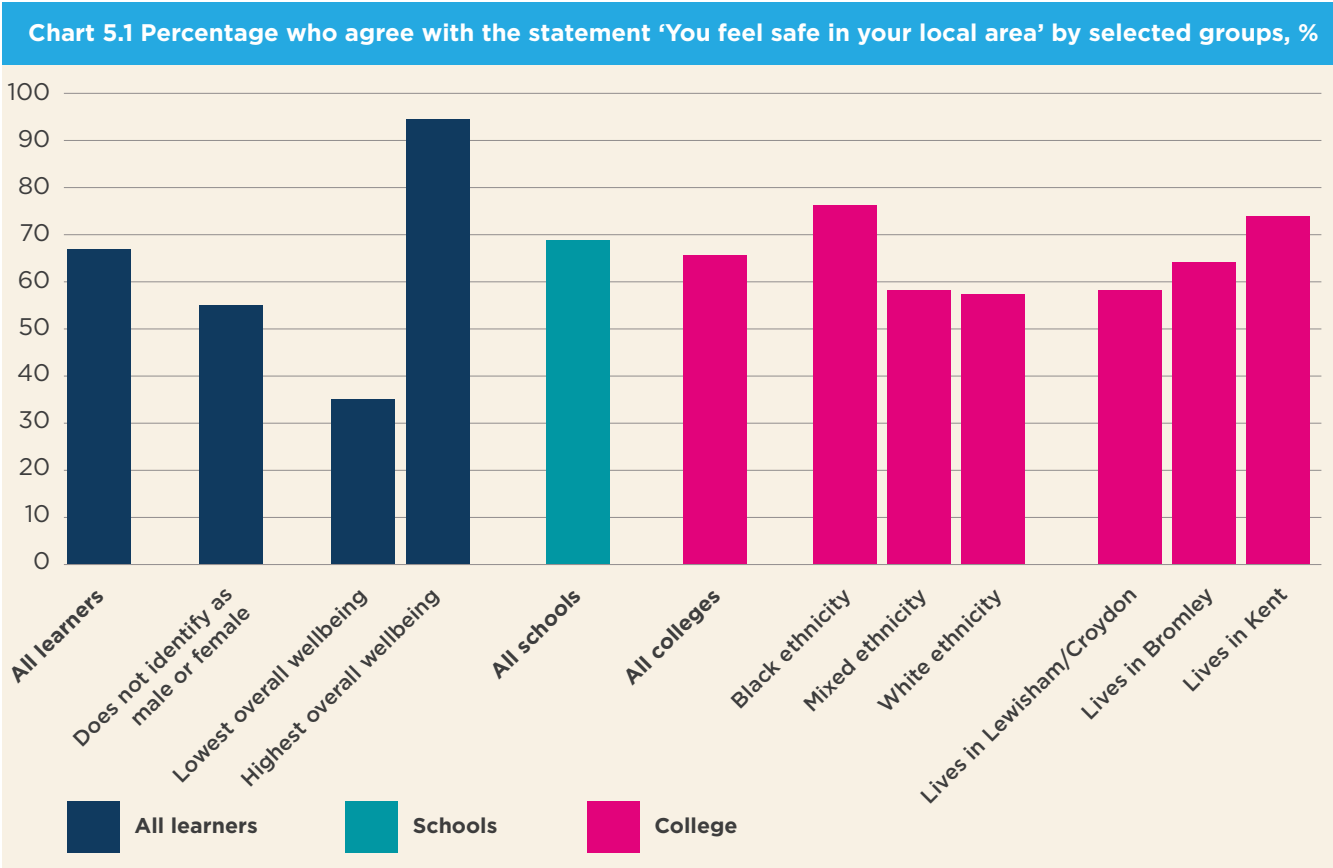
You feel safe in your local area

Overall, two-thirds of learners felt safe in their local area (67%), with no significant variation between learners in the College and schools, by type of school and by whether learners had an EHCP or not. There was also very little variation by age. Those who did not identify as male or female were less likely to say they felt safe (55%).

Local safety was strongly related to overall wellbeing with only 35% of learners with the lowest wellbeing agreeing they felt safe in their local area, compared with 95% of those with the highest wellbeing.

There was no significant variation by level of deprivation in the area in which College learners lived.

There was also an area difference as College learners living in Kent were more likely to say they felt safe (74%) than learners living in Bromley (64%) and Lewisham/Croydon (58%).



Some older learners who reported experiencing crime in their neighbourhoods, mentioned encountering drug dealers/users and violence. While they may report feeling safe in their local areas, their perceptions of safety can be related to a normalisation of these problems or by strategies to deal with risks such as always being accompanied by family members.

“It’s a hit-and-miss, really. Sometimes there’s a lot of ambulance and police officers cause you hear them quite a lot. There have been a couple stabbings around my area, but other than that, it’s pretty quiet”

“It’s really noisy. I’m not sure if it is fires or gun shots but they really sound similar. People shouting all the time, always something going on – fights. But that’s alright. I grew up in that area, so I’m used to it”

Children come to realise the potential dangers surrounding them from a young age, influenced either by personal experience or local news, which starts to affect their perceived safety. When filling in the survey, some young learners told us how their perceptions of insecurity affect their wellbeing: ***“I know I’m safe, but I feel unsafe because of stabbings near my area” and “I don’t feel safe in my local area because ever since my dad’s car got robbed, I haven’t felt safe.”***

Descriptions of local insecurity contrast with the experience of learners growing up in affluent neighbourhoods who generally feel safer. However, some of these learners, particularly older ones, described their neighbourhoods as “posh” to convey both a sense of boredom and social exclusion.

“My neighbourhood is very, very, very posh. There was one row of council houses which obviously I grew up in and a lot of my friends did. And everyone else was posh. My primary school was on my road, so it was just very posh. Obviously, our idea of fun was being little kids. And their idea was ‘they’re just being little rodents.’ So we did get the police crawled on us a couple of times. Got arrested a couple of times. That’s life, happens”

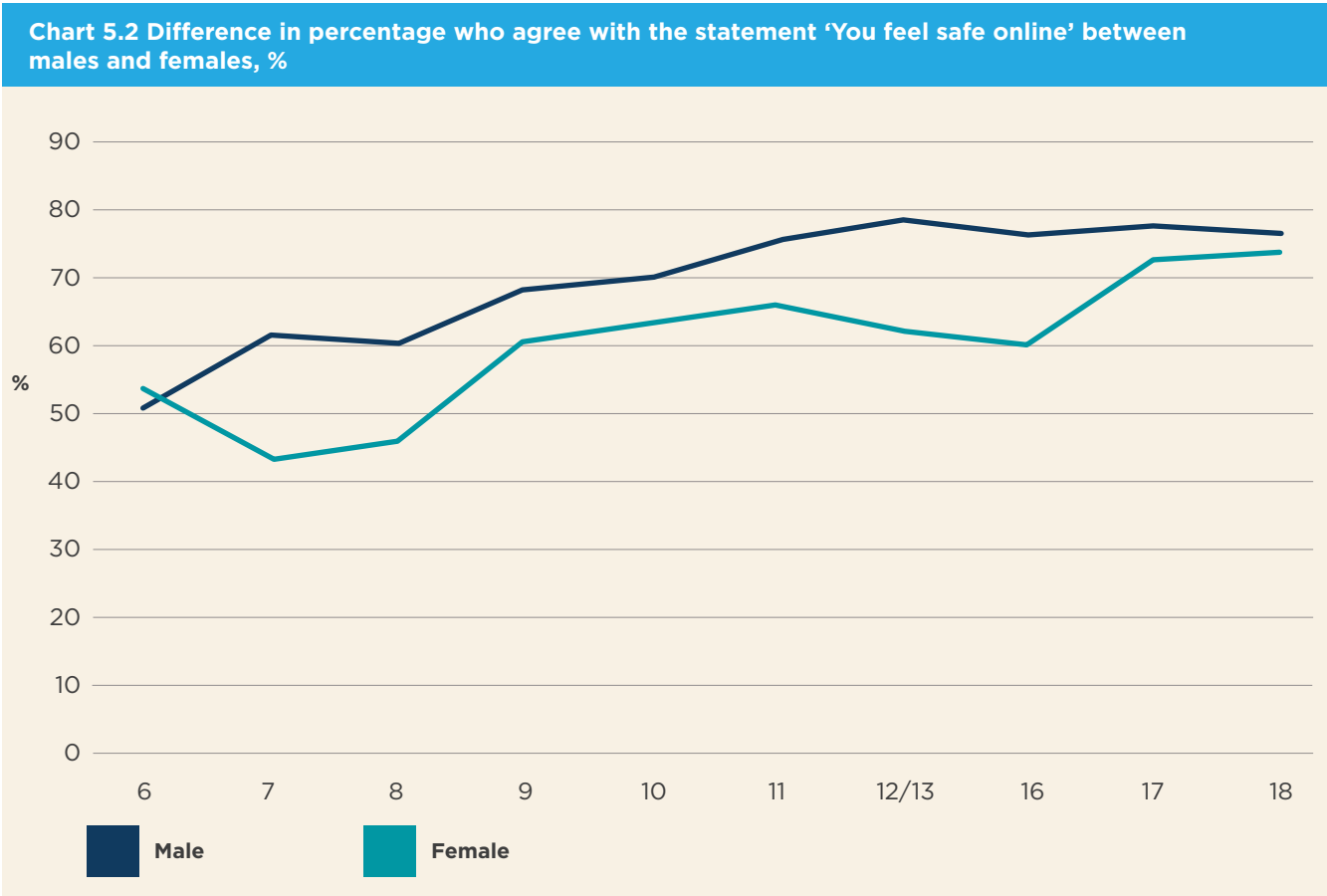
Other children told us how they feel comfortable in their local areas: ***“I feel very safe in my local area. I have fun places around my house”***

You feel safe online

Learners were equally likely to say they felt safe online as they did in their local area (68% compared with 67%) but learners in the College were more likely to agree than those in schools (73% compared with 63%), meaning they felt safer online than in their local area.

This was the only statement where there was a significant difference in agreement between male and female learners with males more likely to say they felt safe online compared with females (72% compared with 63%). This gender gap was present from the age of 7 and upwards. Those who did not identify as male or female were least likely to say they felt safe (57%).

There is a clear age gradient to feelings of safety online with only half of the youngest learners in the survey (6 year olds) saying they feel safe (53%), then the level of agreement increasing throughout primary school age, and plateauing during teenage years.



Note: there were not enough female learners in our specialist school provision aged 14/15 to make a reliable assessment for this age group, and the ages of 12/13 were combined for the same reason. See earlier note in Chapter 1 about our Trust provision by age.

Learners with the highest overall wellbeing were twice as likely to agree they felt safe online than those with the lowest overall wellbeing (91% compared with 47%).

There was very little other variation in online safety. As with safety in the local area, College learners of Black ethnicity were more likely to say they felt safe compared with learners from other ethnic groups.

In the qualitative research, learners spoke about time they spend online in the evening and weekends when not at school or college. This online engagement serves multiple purposes: it allows them to continue socialising with friends beyond school/college hours, and it provides opportunities to connect with new people. Learners who participated in workshops said they feel that online they can find ***“communities to belong in”*** or ***“good matches”*** and ***“having a good amount of online friends and good online presence”***.

Children’s and young people’s experiences online are varied. Learners who felt confident navigating the online world said this was due to their familiarity with technology and the internet. Those indicating that they feel relatively safe online explained the kind of strategies that they use to protect themselves and their data, such as limiting the people they interact with to close friends and family and keeping their passwords safe.

Older students are aware of the risks of online such as verbal abuse. Strategies to cope with these challenges include ignoring negative comments and blocking offenders.

“You get people just calling you every name in the book. Young people just basically verbally abusing you everywhere you go. But it’s just online. It’s nothing”

“Of course I’ve come across a lot of issues online; I’m a teenage girl. When I post something myself online, normally it’s with my friends but then there’s gonna be weird comments that come under it that’s not so nice”

A 16-year-old female student mentioned reducing her online presence to focus on real-life interactions with her family and friends, which has made her feel happier.

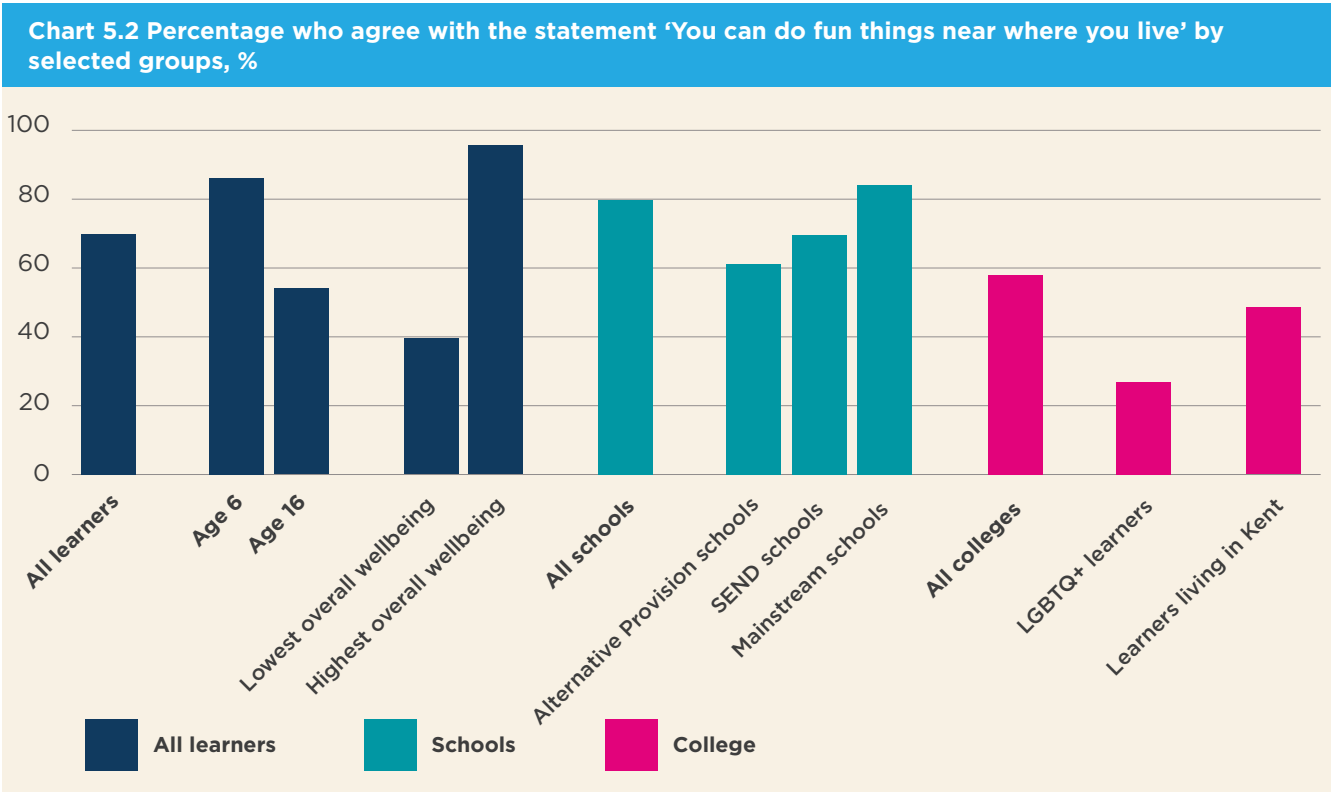
“Online there’s more like people starting things if they didn’t like you, they would make it well known that they didn’t like you (...) It just hit me one day: stop paying as much effort if they’re not paying as much effort in as you. So now I’ve just spaced out a bit and I felt happier within myself, coming off of online things, and spending more time with family and being out in person, talking to them face to face”

Learners who participated in the workshops also mentioned feeling vulnerable online because of the difficulties of knowing *“who is on the other side.”* They were very aware about the dangers of interacting with strangers online and expressed feeling nervous of *“getting catfished”* or *“location tracking.”*

Fun things to do near where you live

70% of learners said there were fun things to do near where they live. This was higher for learners in schools than those at the College (80% compared with 58% due to the relationship with age). 87% of 6 year old learners agreed with this statement compared with 54% of 16 year olds (the age at which they were least likely to agree).

- Having fun activities in the local area contributed to overall wellbeing, as only 40% of those with the lowest overall wellbeing agreed there were fun things to do compared with 96% of those with the highest overall wellbeing.
- There was no difference between the level of agreement for all learners with an EHCP and those who did not have one, although learners at Alternative Provision and SEND schools were less likely to agree with the statement than those at mainstream schools (61% and 70% compared with 84%).
- Within the College, learners who were LGBTQ+ were less likely to agree (27%).
- There was no variation by level of deprivation in the area in which College learners lived, and little geographic variation based on the main home catchment boroughs for the College, with learners living in Bromley, Bexley, Greenwich and Lewisham/Croydon all having a similar level of agreement with the statement, but those living in Kent were less likely to do so (49%).



Age was also an explanatory factor in the qualitative research with some young children discussing the breadth of activities they engaged with outside of their mainstream school, including extracurricular clubs inside and outside of school for sports and creative activities.

“On Monday I do French Club. Tuesday, I do Drama and Thursday I do the Choir. On Wednesday, I’ll do practising for my Eleven Plus. Well, I would do it today, but I’ve got a friend coming for a play date”

Some older learners continue to participate in community activities, such as playing for local football teams. However, many young people reported that they have stopped attending these activities as they have grown older, finding them less engaging and interesting over time. This is consistent with wider research.

“I used to do but not anymore. I used to go to Motorbike Club, I like to fix motorbikes in a youth club. It was actually quite fun, but then it got boring – not boring, just uninteresting”

Young people in schools and the College reported a reduction in their extracurricular activities due to increased academic pressure, particularly as they prepare for their GCSEs. College students shared this experience, describing the challenges they face in balancing academic commitments with other priorities, such as exercise and spending time with friends. They described the pressure of having to perform well in all areas of life as overwhelming, feeling tired from **“having too much work in a day”** or **“constant expectations”**.

More structured extracurricular activities such as youth clubs contrast with more casual hanging out with friends. Older learners spend their free time with friends from their current or previous school with whom they gather to **“do stuff”**. Perceptions of the availability of fun things to do in their local area vary. While some feel they can enjoy themselves close to home, others find they need to travel to nearby towns or cities to find engaging activities

“It’s boring. I live in a village. There’s nothing. All the pubs have shut down. There’s literally just corner shops. So for me to just do something I have to go out of my way to go to Orpington or Sevenoaks or anywhere really, because this area’s got nothing in it”

Children highlighted the importance of public spaces in their local area, such as parks, playgrounds and libraries for their recreation. Children from different primary schools highlighted the central role that parks play in their wellbeing and in the quality of time they spend with their families.

"I like to play in the park with my family"

"I like reading, I go to the library with mummy. I go to the playground with my family"

Although we did not ask about this, many younger children also told us about activities they enjoyed at home that made them happy, when they were given the opportunity to say anything else at the end of the survey. Two popular activities were spending time looking after their pets, and playing computer games.

"I am really comfortable playing with my dog"

"I love Honey, my pet hamster"

"I have fun playing Fortnite"

"I like playing Roblox"

In some areas where there are fun things to do, children's ability to enjoy them may be limited by their family circumstances: ***"There are parks, but I don't get to go out of the house often because I live with my Nan. She loves me but has a scooter and can't walk much."*** In other cases, options can be limited due to accessibility issues: ***"More family and wheelchair accessible events in my area."***

One of the recommendations that we received from learners was to support broadening their horizons.

"Maybe children can be given money for an opportunity to do something they have never done before, and they would like to do"

Friendships and loneliness

The importance of friendships for providing emotional support and feeling part of a community was a recurring theme in the qualitative part of the research. While some of our students have large and strong communities that make them feel valued and supported, many children and young people of all ages struggle with loneliness. ***“Sometimes I feel sad because I am lonely”.***

Younger learners told us they enjoy having groups of friends. They like to spend time with them inside and outside of school, sometimes facilitated by their parents through playdates or during school breaks. They mentioned playing as an important part of their relationships, but also friends as people they can go to for advice.

In contrast, learners of all ages also highlighted the impact bullying has on their wellbeing and how it affects their experience at school. ***“Some guys bully me, and I wanted to leave [this school]”.*** Older learners also mentioned in person and online bullying as a major issue for themselves and their peers.

“Online there’s more like people starting things if they didn’t like you, they would make it well known that they didn’t like you, would just be like things going around, rumours or they’re just start arguments in group chats and things like that. I didn’t really like it. I wasn’t even involved with all them stuff, but you’d hear about it all the time, and it ruined people’s lives”

Older students who we interviewed and who participated in the workshops told us about the difficulties they face in forming and maintaining friendships. This may have implications for learners’ sense of belonging, such as participants in our workshops that described what makes them feel lonely: ***“Being left out in friend groups”*** and ***“no one to talk to.”***

“Me and [my friend] actually sit down the other day and we were like ‘we need friends.’ Because we actually deep inside down are like ‘we have no other friends apart from each other.’ But I talked to her, I said I’d rather have one pound than a hundred pennies”

Learners in Alternative Provision told us about the challenges they face in maintaining friendships. In some cases, this is linked to difficulties in keeping in touch with classmates after having moved schools several times and across different areas. The reasons for exclusions were also raised by pupils who felt that their challenging behaviour and difficulties in regulating their emotions had prevented them from establishing lasting relationships with their peers.

*“I don’t really have friends in my local area. Back in the day, when I used to be a bit of a b****rd a lot of people didn’t like me. I’ll admit some of it was my own thing but some of it wasn’t. So, from a young age I learnt that some people like me, some don’t. That’s just how it is. Back home, I only have one friend in my area, but I never really speak to him that much anymore”*

Acknowledging the crucial role that positive friendships play in wellbeing, College learners recognised that they needed support to improve their friendship groups and more diverse opportunities to meet people within the College. They suggested creative ways of doing this: **“make an online chat for college students”** in order to provide more safe spaces to meet new people. They stressed that social life and not just academics should be emphasised. Several groups suggested ways to encourage social interaction, such as adding content in tutorials on how to be more confident and manage different types of relationships or creating more spaces for socialising beyond their campus’ common room and canteen.





CHAPTER 6

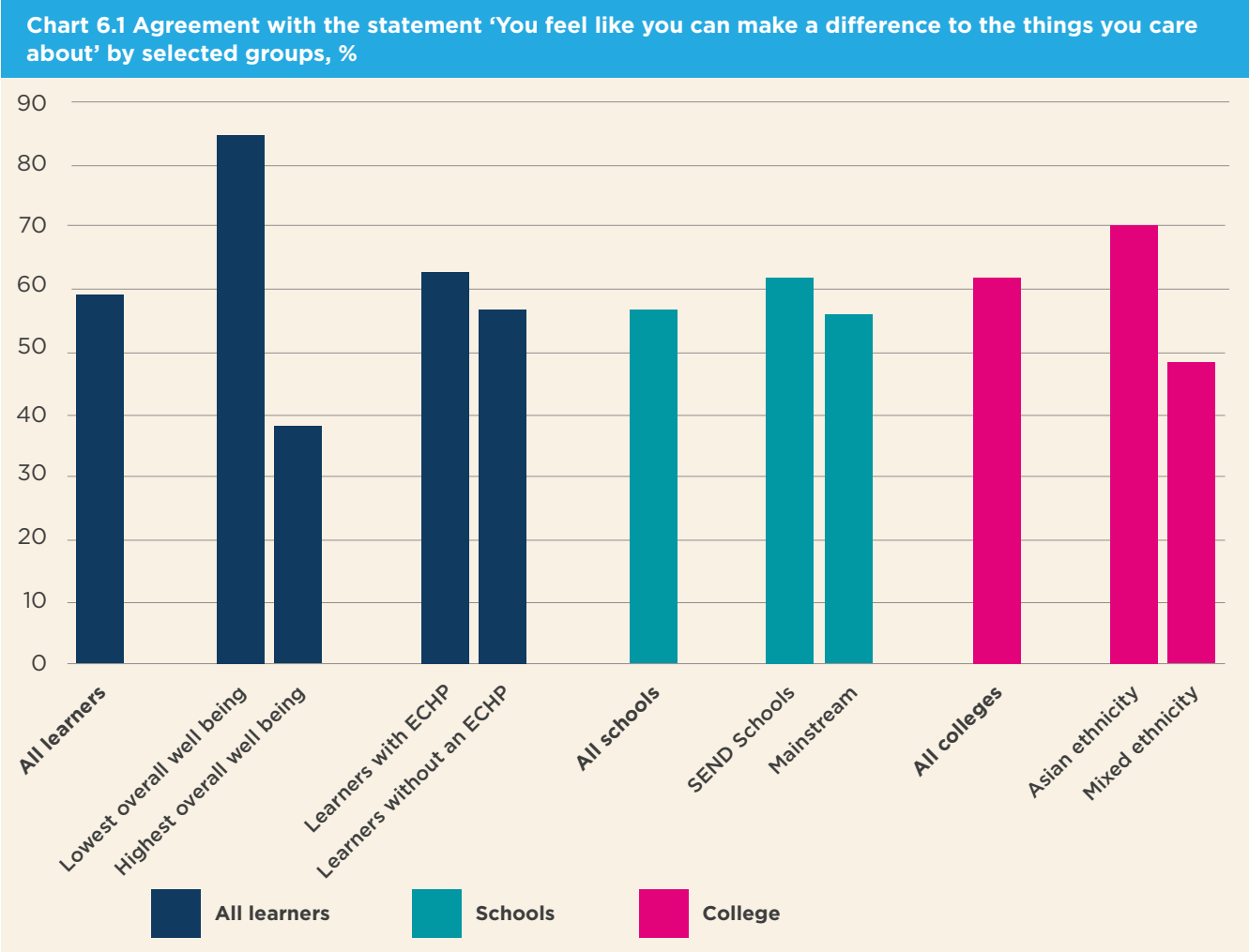
OUR LEARNERS' PLACE IN THE WORLD

Key findings

- Three in five (59%) of our learners agreed that they could make a difference to the things they cared about.
- Less than a fifth of learners agreed that the people running the country listened to their views. This was especially low among some groups of learners in the College.
- Two-thirds of learners felt they were treated fairly, but just over half of our learners agreed they had the same opportunities as other children. Learners with EHCPs, attending Alternative Provision schools, and College learners with learning difficulties were among those less likely to agree.
- Learners mainly referred to influencing their immediate environments when discussing making a difference – often thinking of advice they provide to friends and siblings or being willing to help others. This understanding of their agency at a closer area of influence contrasts with the feelings of disempowerment that young people described when reflecting upon life situations that go beyond their control.
- Some learners who had more contact with those in authority described the difficulties they experienced in negotiating with them about their home and the school they attend. But despite this, 36% of College learners who were Looked After Children agreed that the people who run the country listen to their views – higher than the overall figure for this group.
- Learners felt that the people who run the country should listen to them and talked about positive examples, like their School Parliament, as examples of how this can work.
- Learners attending Alternative Provision schools were less likely to agree they were treated fairly. A common theme in the qualitative research was their perception that they were treated unfairly at mainstream schools and that rules were often applied selectively.
- Other learners gave a range of examples outside the education system of where they felt they had been treated unfairly due to their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and special educational needs.

Making a difference

- Three in five (59%) of our learners agreed that they could make a difference to the things they cared about. There was no significant variation between schools or the College, or by age or gender.
- Learners with EHCPs were more likely to agree than those without and related to this, those attending SEND schools were more likely to agree than those attending mainstream schools (62% compared with 55%).
- There was some difference by ethnicity, with college learners who were Asian/Asian British more likely to agree than those of Mixed ethnicity.
- There was no difference for College learners by sexual orientation or religion.
- The ability to make a difference was strongly correlated with overall wellbeing, with only 38% of those with the lowest overall wellbeing agreeing with the statement compared with 85% of those with the highest overall wellbeing.



Many young people feel confident that they can influence their immediate environment, as they were proud to describe how their siblings and friends look to them for advice. This ability provides them with a sense of agency and boosts their self-esteem.

“My siblings look up to me a lot. My friends also look up to me or whenever they’ve got problems, they ask me how I would deal with it”

Some students associated their ability to make a difference with their willingness to help others.

“My mates will come to me if they’re upset or if they’ve got something going on. I see myself as like a therapist for my friends. I may not do well for myself, but I do give the best advice for people”

We heard the experience of students in Alternative Provision who carry the legacy of having misbehaved in their previous schools: **“apparently I’m a bad influence”**. The experience of being labelled affects the way they understand their ability to influence the world around them and generates resentment rather than channelling their abilities as positive leaders for their peers.

Students understanding of their agency at a closer area of influence contrasts with the feelings of disempowerment that young people described when reflecting upon life situations that go beyond their control, even at a local level. For instance, a young male student described his frustration when trying to influence his previous school’s decision to exclude him and manage his move into an Alternative Provision setting. Although he had been warned about this option if he did not change his behaviour, he described the frustrations of trying to convince them otherwise.

Similarly, a learner who went into the care system at a young age described the frustrations associated with trying to change his family environment and realising that he does not have full control over other people’s decisions and the way they affect him. He described the difficulties of dealing with an alcoholic parent and having to accept he couldn’t change their behaviour himself.

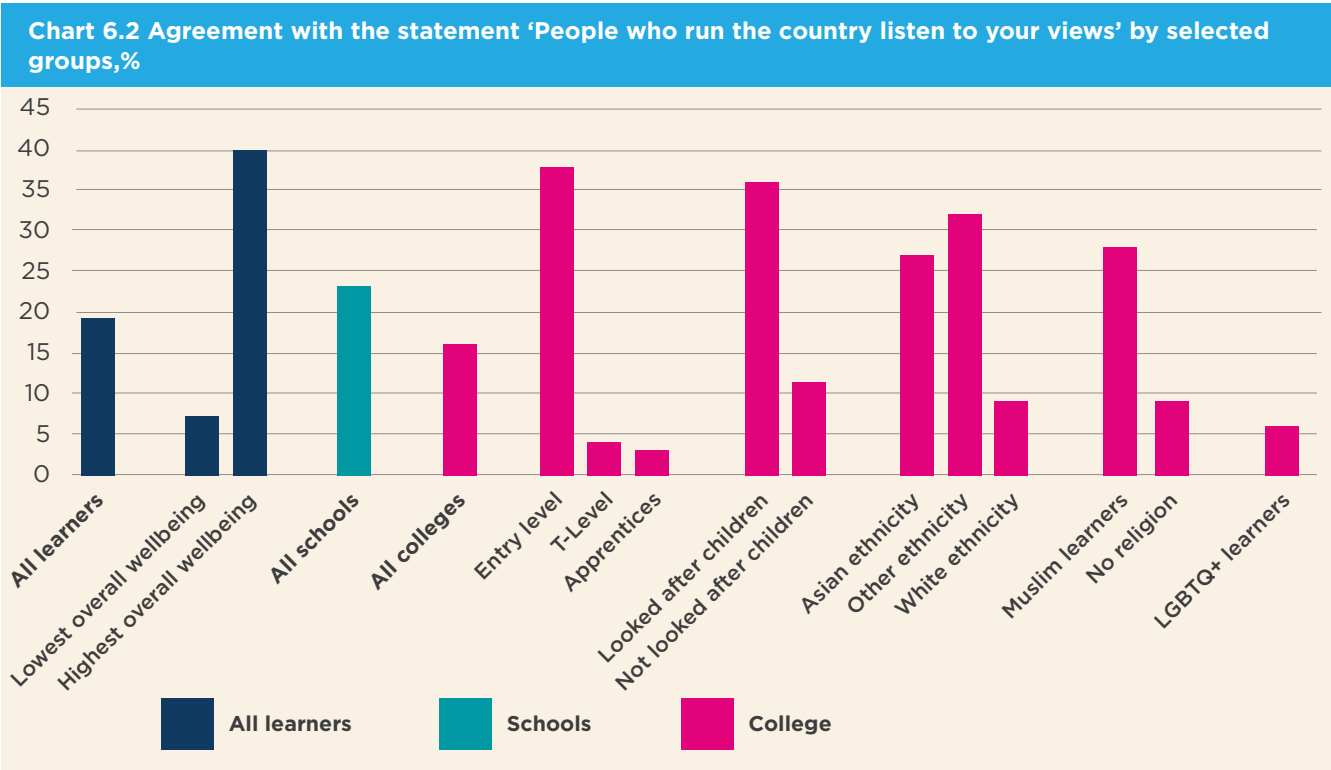
Other learners in the same age group expressed a similar sense of disempowerment when reflecting about their ability to influence the world at a larger scale:

“I feel like the world is a big place. I don’t think one person can change the world. I think it’s too far gone, to be honest. There’s no point in me trying to change the world, I don’t think”

People who run the country listen to your views

Less than a fifth of learners agreed that the people who run the country listened to their views. It was slightly higher in Trust schools (23%) compared with the College (16%). There was no variation by school provision type.

- Among College learners, there was variation by course type and level. 38% of those learners at entry level agreed, compared with only 3% of College apprentices and 4% of those studying T-levels. This finding is surprising and suggests a high level of disengagement.
- A group of College learners who were more engaged were Looked After Children who were more likely to agree than those who were not (36% compared with 11%). This provides a slightly different perspective of their experience in dealing with their own social care and gives a broader picture than some of the views expressed in the qualitative research above.
- Other College learners who were most likely to agree were those who were of Asian/Other ethnicity who were more likely to agree than White learners (27% and 32% compared with 9%).
- Other groups who were less likely to agree included LGBTQ+ learners (6%), and those with the lowest overall wellbeing (7%, compared with 40% of those with the highest overall wellbeing).



The young people we interviewed are sceptical about the Government's willingness to listen to their views and to change and to govern for their benefit in areas that are important to them such as the education system, the safety and care of their neighbourhoods or families struggling financially.

"I think the education system is broken. It's not as successful as it could have been and I don't see that the government are doing anything about it, to make it a better place for students to actually be happy to learn and actually want to learn"

Some of our learners' requests to their local governments may seem simple but could have impact in how they feel within their communities. For instance, one learner's message for the government was: ***"try to get more dustmen to help clean our community"***

The perception that the government do not understand or listen to young people was a recurring theme. One student specifically mentioned knife violence as an example of something the government struggle to understand and act upon.

In this context, children and young people expressed their desire for more support and understanding from adults that have power over their lives. Students of different ages highlighted the importance of having instances where their views can be amplified, leading to significant changes in the things that are important to them.

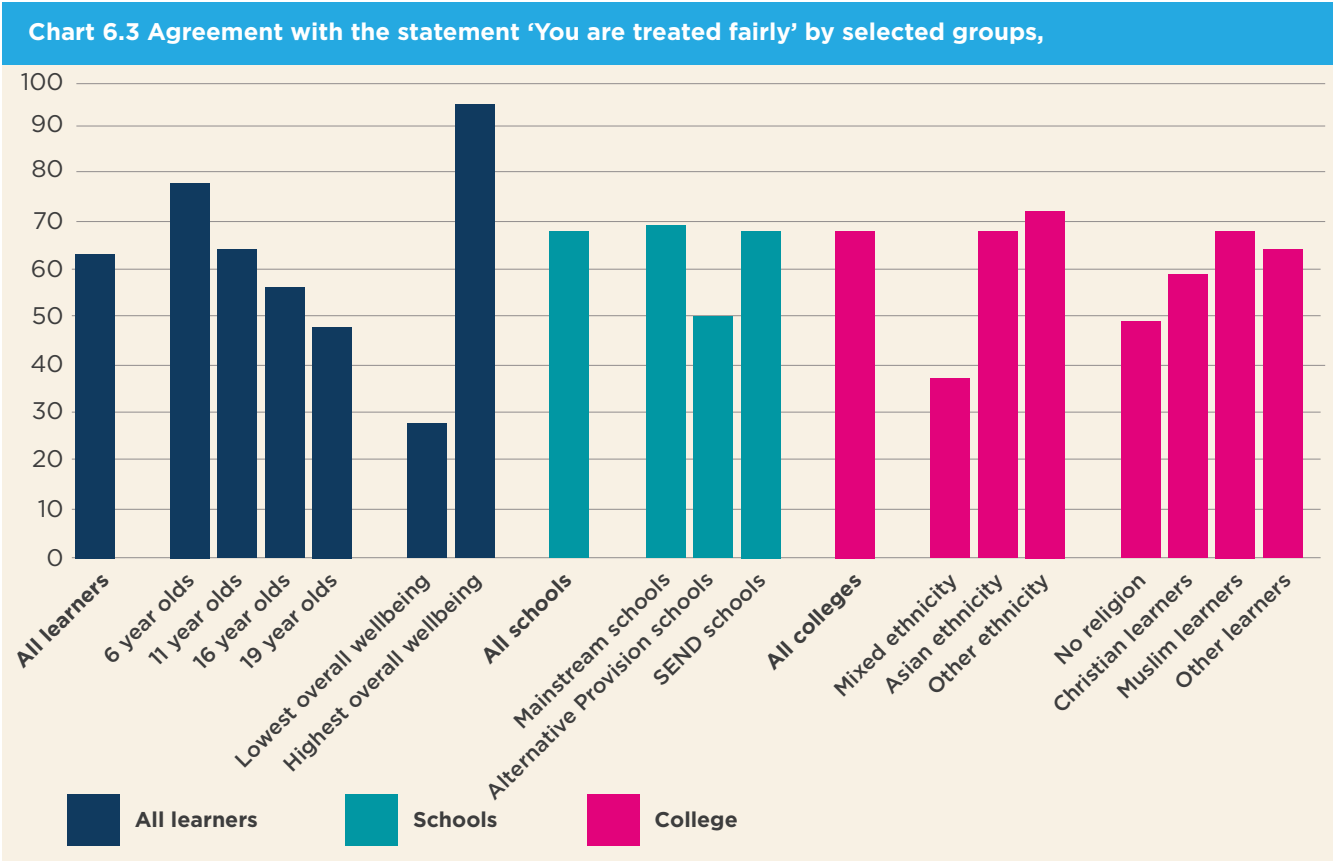
"Children should have their opinions. Someone advocates on their behalf and then stuff can be done so they can reflect children's as well as adult's problems"

"I'm glad that we've got a school Parliament because the children can find out what the other children that are in Parliament like and then they can tell the adults and then the adults could grant those wishes or hopes if they're sensible"

You are treated fairly

Overall, 63% of learners said they were treated fairly. There was a clear age gradient with agreement declining as age increased. 78% of 6-year-olds agreed but only 48% of those aged 19 said the same. Linked to this, agreement was higher in schools (68%) compared with the College (57%). The survey question did not attempt to define what was meant by treated fairly and learners referred to a range of unfair treatment relating to both their treatment in education and in other situations.

- Within schools, agreement was lower for those in Alternative Provision schools than mainstream and SEND schools (50% compared with 69% and 68%), perhaps reflecting their experiences at previous schools that led them to move into an Alternative Provision school.
- There was a significant variation by religion with those who had ‘no religion’ being less likely to agree than those who were from the main other religions. (49%, compared with Christian (59%), Muslim (68%), Other religions (64%). This is interesting as in adult population surveys of fair treatment and wellbeing, those from Muslim and other religions often report unfair treatment and discrimination due to their religion.
- Those with the lowest overall wellbeing were the least likely to agree they were treated fairly, as were college learners of Mixed ethnicity compared with those with Asian or Other ethnicity (37%, compared with 68% and 72%).



Inconsistency in the application of school rules and expectations was mentioned as having a negative impact in student experience, leading to a sense of unfairness, particularly among learners who have been labelled as poorly behaved.

"I feel like there is a lot of prejudice. You can follow rules and mess up once and everything is gone. Other people can break rules and still get what they want. I don't agree with that"

"They're going to set a rule they don't actually follow it. If you set a rule, follow it. Don't straight away from your word or stuff like that (...) And obviously cause I've been to a lot of different schools, I feel like they expected me to be what I was from my other school, and they expected me to be a bad behaved kid, bad child basically"

Other children and young people of different ages let us know how they experience discrimination in their daily lives, in some cases at a young age, because of their:

Race

"People be mean to me by saying like I smell or something, but I am black person, and I have rights"

Gender

"I don't like it when I'm treated differently at my rugby club because I'm one of the only girls there, so I'm never passed to. Also, I get skipped in the line. It also happens to the two other girls"

Sexual orientation

“In year x, as far as I know, I was the first gay person. Lots of other students hadn’t met any gay people. They think they are all in Brighton or something. When you are in London you just want to be yourself, you don’t want to get attacked on the street or something. I’m fine, I don’t go out very much, but with discrimination, people are scared to be themselves. I’ve been out, but people can be judgemental. My experience has been on and off”

Special educational needs

“I was a school refuser because I got isolated because of my special educational needs in a mainstream primary school. I spoke to them about it, and they basically just put me to the side because of my ADHD and dyslexia. I got isolated with one of my other friends who was very autistic”

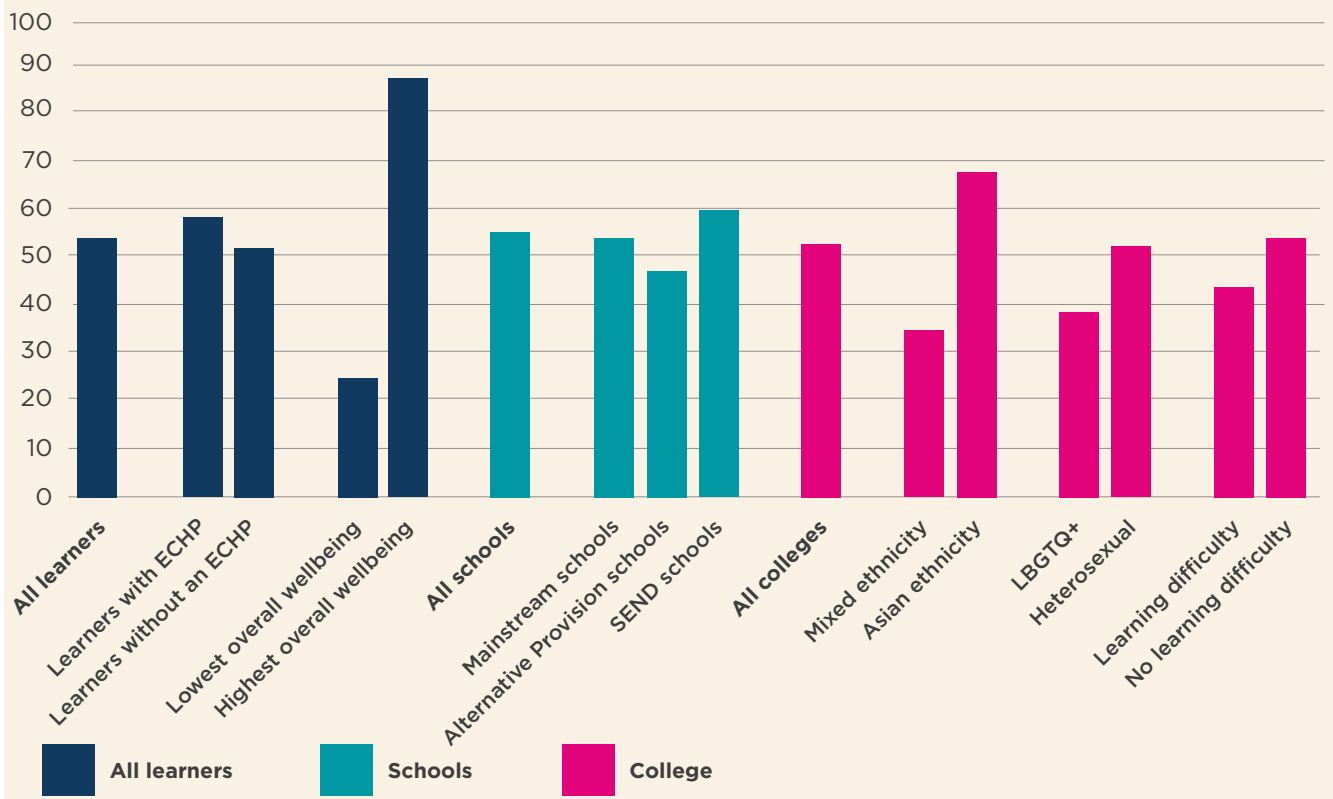
You have the same opportunities as other children

Just over half (54%) of learners felt that they had the same opportunities as other children. Learners with EHCPs were more likely to agree than those without (58% compared with 52%). There was no variation between the school and college, but those in Alternative Provision schools were less likely to agree than those at SEND schools (47% compared with 55%). There was no difference by age or gender.

Groups who were least likely to agree were similar to those in the previous question on fair treatment:

- College learners with a learning difficulty (44%, compared with 54% of those without one)
- College learners of Mixed ethnicity (34% compared with 68% of Asian learners)
- College learners who were LGBTQ+ (38%, compared with 52% of those who were straight or heterosexual) and
- those with lowest overall wellbeing (24%, compared with 88% of those with the highest wellbeing)

Chart 6.4 Agreement with the statement 'You have the same opportunities as other children' by selected groups, %



CHAPTER 7

EDUCATION, JOBS AND SKILLS



Key findings

- Students' experiences at school and college vary widely. Just over half of our learners said they enjoyed school or college but three-quarters agreed they had great teachers and lecturers. Younger learners were more likely to agree that they enjoyed school than older learners.
- Within the College there was a relationship between enjoyment and attendance. Those learners in the top attendance quintile were almost twice as likely to enjoy college as those in the bottom quintile.
- Many learners highlighted the positive influence of teachers/lecturers who understand their needs and provide personalised support. They referred to staff in a range of roles that are crucial to their positive experiences in school and college.
- The views of some learners in our specialist or Alternative Provision schools were affected by negative experience of education in a previous mainstream school. They told us how felt their current school was better at providing a supportive environment to cater for their individual needs and improve academic performance.
- Learner perspectives highlight the optimism and the uncertainties that young people face as they plan their futures. Younger children often have imaginative and evolving career aspirations.
- Some of our older learners have very concrete plans and are actively working towards their career goals, while others described being worried and scared about their future. Some of these fears relate to achieving their qualifications not just in their chosen vocational area but also the implications of not passing English and Maths GCSEs.
- Some of our learners find their next career steps really challenging, despite aspiring for career pathways that are not out of the ordinary. This can be because their parents and role models have had more limited employment opportunities.

You enjoy school/college

Fifty-two per cent of our learners agreed they enjoyed school or college. This is lower than the national figure of 64% which reflects the older age of our learners. A lower proportion of our learners disagreed than nationally (15% compared with 19%).

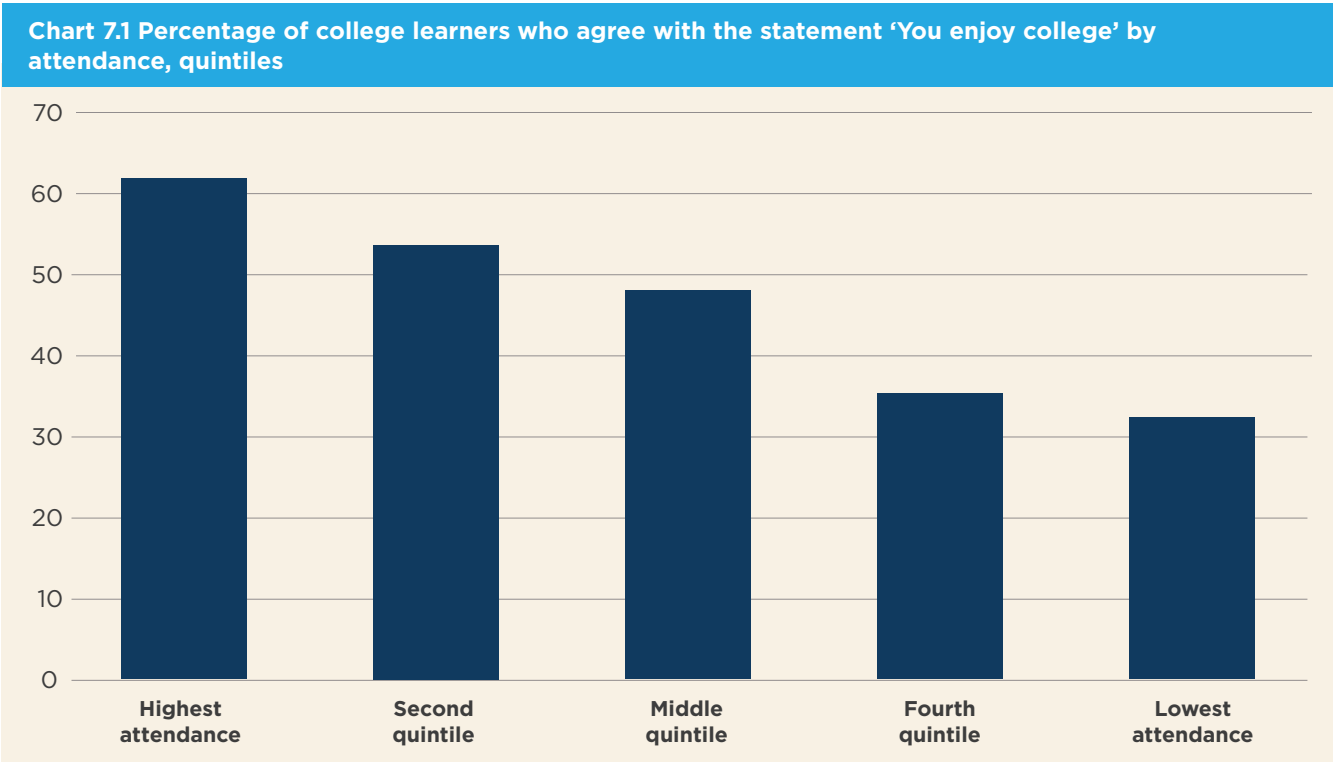
Like a number of other indicators this was negatively correlated with age, with 74% of 6 year olds agreeing, compared with 45% of 19 year olds (though this increased to 89% for those aged 20 and above with special needs studying in Nido Volans).

There was no significant difference between type of school provision. This reflects the findings of the qualitative research where those we interviewed at Alternative Provision schools, or those at SEND schools who had had a negative experience of mainstream education told us that their current school was better at listening to and understanding them.

There was no difference between learners with EHCPs and those without them.

Only 22% of those with the lowest overall wellbeing scores enjoyed school or college compared with 84% of those whose scores were in the highest third. There was no gender difference between male and female but only 35% of those who did not identify as male or female agreed – this group were more likely to say they disagreed or did not know/prefer not to say.

Within the College there was a relationship between enjoyment and attendance. Those learners in the top attendance quintile were almost twice as likely to enjoy college as those in the bottom quintile (61% compared with 32%).



There was significant variation by ethnicity and religion. Learners from the Asian and Other ethnic groups were most likely to say they enjoyed college (both 58%) compared with those who were White (42%), Mixed (37%) and Black (45%) ethnic groups. Those students who were Muslim were around 20% more likely to say they enjoyed college (63%) compared with other religions.

There was no difference between those who had an EHCP and those who did not, by campus or level of course or borough of residence.

Those with more positive experiences at school highlighted various things that they enjoyed about it, including some lessons in particular, the school environment or having good teachers.

“I like that we get play time, but we still have lots of lesson time because I like school, it’s my one of my favourite place”

Children and young people told us about their favourite lessons and how they enjoyed them because they were good at them, or because they were engaging or aligned well with their plans for the future. For instance, talking about why he likes English lesson, a child explained: ***“I like writing because I got my pen licence which means you’re allowed to write in your books in pen. I have good writing, my teacher said.”***

For other students, the motivation is to learn something new:

“When I do English, I also express myself, but I express myself through writing, and I love learning about new vocabulary because then once the word goes into my brain, it’s hard to come out and then I remember their definition, I’ll use it in my writing, and it will sound good”

One young person participating in the workshops said they felt ***“calm in the college – I enjoy what I do.”***

Younger pupils explained the aspects that they do not enjoy about school. In their survey responses, various young pupils described their experiences being bullied: ***“I feel sad because my friends are being mean to me and saying mean things to me.”***

Children and young people of different ages also highlighted coursework as one of the things that they found less enjoyable about school and college.

“The cons is the paperwork. Not nice. You do the paperwork and it’s a very, very long piece of paperwork that you have to work towards throughout the whole year. And that’s the only problem I have with it. Other than that, it’s easy. It’s just very long. Physically, that is a lot easier for me because I learn by getting taught stuff, by teaching, not just writing stuff down”

This criticism was echoed by students in the College who felt **“tired due to coursework”** or angry because they **“hate coursework.”** To address this, some students suggested **“reforming college timetables and routines to make students less tired, improving wellbeing”** and recommended the College **“provided training on time management.”**

School and college facilities are key to student wellbeing. Young people in the College highlighted the importance that the common rooms have for their studying experience, describing them as spaces where they felt calm, relaxed or excited. **“The common room’s the only room where you’re relaxed.”** Others highlighted the need for better equipment and materials for their lessons.

One young man indicated that he feels okay about school and is focused on achieving his physical education qualification because it supports his plans to become a sports coach. However, he highlighted that the lack of outdoor space in the school made this difficult. Similarly, when asked about what improvements they would like to see in their schools, young people from different settings mentioned the need to upgrade the facilities.

Young people in specialist and Alternative Provision settings told us what they enjoy about these settings and how they contrast with the mainstream schools they have been in the past. A recurring theme among these students was the difference that smaller class sizes made in their learning and behaviour. They described their schools as more supportive environments that have helped them to improve their behaviour and academic performance.

“In my other school there were like 30 or 35 students in each classroom where this one is like 10ish. I don’t get distracted as easy as I was”

Some older students who have been in various schools articulated a strong sense of disconnection from the school system in general, describing it as overly controlling and dismissive of their maturity and lived experiences. They felt that their autonomy was undermined, and their voices repressed.

“I’ve outgrown the school. I will be leaving soon because of I feel like I need to go out in the real world. In a sense, where I grew up, I had to grow up really fast, went into care, got babied a lot, being treated like an actual kid even though I grew up so quick when I was young because of the situation I was in. It kind of threw me off and coming here now I still feel like I’m a kid when I’m actually 17 years of age and I feel like I should be moving on with my life”

You have great teachers who support you

Learners were much more likely to agree that they had great teachers/lecturers who supported them than they were to say they enjoyed school. Overall, 75% of learners agreed with this statement, 80% of learners in schools, and 70% of learners in the College.

Most of the variation was similar to that for those who enjoyed school or college.

Unlike with enjoyment at school, there was a significant variation for those with special needs. Those at SEND schools were less likely to agree than those at mainstream schools (68% compared with 83%) and more likely to say they didn’t know or preferred not to say (24%). At the College, those with an EHCP were less likely to agree than those without one (69% compared with 75%), but this tended to relate to those with EHCPs on mainstream college courses, as 94% of those in the specialist Nido Volans SEND courses agreed they had great teachers.

Again, there was a correlation with attendance where 78% of those in the top quintile for attendance said they agree, compared with 61% in the bottom quintile.

A recurring theme in the interviews was the significant impact of supportive teachers on students’ educational experiences.

“I like the teachers. My sister really wanted a person called [name] for year five and she got him. My sister was really lucky. I don’t really care what teacher I got because I think all of the teachers are really nice”

Many students highlighted the positive influence of teachers who understand their needs and provide personalised support. For instance, explaining why maths was her favourite lesson, this pupil explained:

“Get on with the teacher. So, I can always go to her whenever it’s to do with the lesson or not with the lesson. But if I don’t understand it, she knows straight away before I even say anything. She knows if I take too long on the question or if I feel a bit distracted, she can talk to me and tell me how to do it and how to how to work around different ways to get the question correct”

Children and young people of different ages not only mentioned teachers but referred to staff in a range of roles that are crucial to their positive experiences in school and college. They mentioned mentors, tutors and staff in safeguarding roles who they knew they could go to if they needed support. For instance, one young person in the College said: ***“I feel relaxed in tutorial lessons.”***

Students in specialist and Alternative Provision settings recognise that many teachers in mainstream schools lack the resources to provide the individual support that they need in order to engage in lessons. They described past experiences where they did not feel seen or listened to. In contrast, many feel that in their current setting they can approach staff easily when they need support and that teachers notice when they are disengaged.

“I don’t like mainstream school cause, obviously there’s normal, but there’s a lot of other people where the teachers don’t have as much time as they do here, so they can’t really... like here, they will be able to talk to, there, they don’t really”

“Because it is quite such a small school, with such small class, you can’t really just fall asleep in the back of the classroom. In mainstream, you’d be able to”

The lack of resources was also mentioned in the workshops with College learners, who described how teacher recruitment and retention issues is disrupting their education, particularly amidst the pressure for achieving their GCSEs: ***“worrying about change of English teachers.”***

Learners who participated in the workshops mentioned they would like the opportunity to have their voices heard and suggested ***“asking student’s feedback on teachers and their teaching”***. Those worrying about their GCSEs recommended introducing ***“after school study sessions for maths”*** as well as ***“help for students with their assignments.”***

Jobs and skills

The easy-read survey questionnaire did not include questions about learner aspirations or preparations for future employment, but this was covered in the qualitative research.

Common themes include the importance of education and qualifications, the influence of personal interests and experiences, and the perceived challenges and support needed to achieve their goals. Students’ experiences highlight the optimism and the uncertainties that young people face as they plan their futures.

Young people we interviewed recognise the importance of education and qualifications in achieving their goals. Some older students in particular have very concrete plans and are actively working towards their career goals. They are aware of the specific subjects and levels of education required for their career choices.

For instance, a young man aged 16 who wants to be a sports coach explained that he wants to pursue a BTEC in sports and for that he is currently working hard towards his physical education, maths, English and science GCSEs. Similarly, a young lady who wants to become a corporate lawyer explained her plans of working part-time as a barista while coursing her A levels in business, psychology and government and politics that will prepare her for university.

“I want to be a hairdresser. Just finished up Level 2 Hair and Beauty. I’m going to North Kent College for Level 3 if I get accepted. If not, I’ll be going into an apprenticeship within a salon”

Many learners, such as the one quoted above, have had the chance to explore their interests through the vocational courses we offer in our schools, and they wish to pursue these career opportunities in higher level courses. For others, secondary education has provided them with the essential skills to transition to new fields.

“I want to become a firefighter. Just taking little steps to get there at the moment. To get my maths Level 2, that’s the only reason I’m really here [in school] at the moment and I also need to get my fire safety, my first aid safety, get into the fire cadets and then get into the fire service”

Young people also recognise the challenges they may face in achieving their career goals and the support they need to overcome these obstacles. These challenges include difficulties in acquiring knowledge in a new subject, in achieving the required qualifications and navigating the qualifications landscape.

“I’m hoping that I could make music one day. Obviously, that’s a big dream and then some people don’t really get that kind of dream. But I’ve got hope for. That’s the reason I’m joining college cause I wouldn’t know how to start it up and I wouldn’t know how to do anything”

Some learners close to transition into their new stage of education recognise that they need careers support to navigate the intricate qualifications landscape. For instance, a learner who told us about one of his college options to pursue a career in the fashion industry:

“It’s a stressful thing when I went to open day, cause I’ve got level 2 functional skills – one person told me they accepted that, one person said they didn’t. From that day it’s been going back and forth trying to sort it out”

Some of our learners find their next career steps really challenging, despite aspiring for career pathways that are not out of the ordinary.

“Right now, I’m looking to being a teacher, but I think the easiest job is one that my parents or carers work in, maybe like Sainsbury’s”

Uncertainties and fear about a future career were common themes in workshops with College learners who described being **“terrified for the future because if careers choice”** or **“worried [about] not knowing what to do after College.”** Some of these discussions intertwined with the challenges they face in achieving maths and English GCSEs, and their worries about the implications of this for their career paths.

Younger children often have imaginative and evolving career aspirations. Their ambitions are influenced by their changing interests and experiences, and do not seem to be yet permeated by the fears expressed by older students.

*“I used to want to be a scientist and a footballer,
but now I want to be a gladiator”*

*“I want to be a YouTuber, gamer or a football player.
YouTubers make a lot of money just by playing a game.
That’s like the easiest way to get money or get a good job”*

*“I know it’s a bit of a weird ambition and like most people
would want to be like footballers or singers, but I’d quite
like to be an air hostess because when I went on my first
aeroplane trip, I was scared of the acceleration cause I’m not
a big fan of roller coasters and such, and then I loved it!”*



CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS



Key findings

Patterns of wellbeing:

- Our research showed a wide spectrum of wellbeing experiences in our schools and College. It is encouraging that half of our learners have high wellbeing and that they are found across all age groups, at each of our schools and college campuses.
- But this research has identified a small proportion of learners expressing low wellbeing across a range of indicators that we can seek to improve by targeting support from our LASER Foundation. These groups include some learners in our Alternative Provision and SEND schools and others with an EHCP who attend mainstream college. These also include Looked After Children, and those who identify as LGBTQ+ or a gender other than male or female.
- The relationship between wellbeing and having special educational needs can be complex with our research finding some learners in this group having very positive wellbeing and others being less likely to agree with the wellbeing indicator statements in a number of areas.

Home and family support:

- It is sad that not all learners agree they have a place to call home and feel loved and cared for. Looked After Children, those with SEND and those who are LGBTQ+ or do not identify as male or female are more likely to say this.
- While most learners agreed their families had what they needed to support them, this perception was significantly lower among others. In some cases their families struggled to provide for them financially but in other cases it was the emotional support they felt they lacked, which is also critical to their wellbeing.

Emotional literacy and mental health:

- Our schools play a vital role in developing the emotional literacy of our learners. They explicitly teach them tools and techniques to regulate their emotions and manage their behaviour. While many pupils arrive to our Alternative Provision and SEND schools without the emotional knowledge and skills they need, they deeply value how our schools are well prepared to rapidly turn this around.
- However, the research shows how some young people continue to struggle with mental health issues. This is exacerbated by feelings of loneliness and the concerning finding that many learners are less likely to have someone supportive to talk to as they grow older, with a large dip at the ages of 12 and 13 that does not quite recover to previous levels. Therefore, our learners miss opportunities to open up about their life concerns and mental health issues in their critical teenage years.

Physical health:

- While children and young people have good understanding of a healthy lifestyle, they find it harder to maintain this as they grow older and balance the challenges of maintaining a healthy diet and engaging in physical activities with rising academic pressures. Many lose interest and stop engaging in such activities. This is particularly challenging for learners with less family support and living in areas with little access to spaces and venues for these types of activities.

Communities, friendships and safety:

- Most learners felt safe in their local areas and online, although older learners felt safer online than in their local area. Learners highlighted the significance of online space in connecting with friends and finding new communities and belonging. However, perceptions of safety varied by gender - learners who did not identify as male or female reported feeling less safe in their local area and female learners reported feeling less safe online. While many young people reported navigating online environments confidently, others expressed concerns about the abuse and trolling they have to deal with, and others had witnessed some of their peers having bad experiences.

- Many students report feeling lonely and lacking the social skills and opportunities to establish and maintain meaningful friendships, despite all the opportunities of being online. Other learners find their friendships are weakened by disruptions in their education.
- Some children lack access to fun activities in their local area, which has a significant impact in their wellbeing. Depending on where they live, their age and family circumstances, opportunities to safely try new experiences that broaden their horizons are often limited.

Education:

- Our learners told us they are supported by great teachers, lecturers and other staff. Having staff who understand their pupils' needs and can provide appropriate support is essential to a positive educational experience. That is why recruiting high-quality teachers, investing in their professional development to strengthen their teaching practice, and giving them the time to build meaningful relationships with their learners – so they can offer tailored support – is directly linked to children's and young people's wellbeing.

Opportunity, agency and empowerment:

- Our young people demonstrated confidence in influencing their immediate surroundings, often taking pride in being role models for peers and siblings. However, this strong sense of agency decreased when considering broader societal or political contexts, where many felt unheard and powerless.
- Some feel disempowered as a result of their experiences liaising with public services over deeply significant individual circumstances such as their care and/or education, whereas others appeared to be empowered by more positive experiences. Others feel disempowered by their experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment, sometimes from a young age. This can lead to feelings that they lack access to the same opportunities as others.
- Some groups expressed extremely low levels of engagement or confidence that they are listened to by leaders in the country and this is a serious concern. Young people wanted opportunities to influence decision-making at a range of levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LASER EDUCATION FOUNDATION:

The voices of our learners have highlighted a number of areas where we can support them and their wider communities through our LASER Foundation and other programmes. These include:

- 1. Support to develop friendships and reduce loneliness** – both the survey and qualitative research revealed that some groups of learners struggle with friendships, are lonely, and lack supportive people to talk to. Our research suggests that LASER could:
 - Fund activities at the College which would bring learners together to help them make friends and enjoy their education, as well as improve their overall wellbeing.
 - Support children during/after school transition points.
 - Support work to reduce the discrimination felt by some groups of learners by educating our wider community to accept our diversity.
- 2. Mentoring** – some of our young learners would benefit from wider support and guidance outside their immediate family and friends to help with difficult and scary decisions, such as training and career choices, and to help navigate education for those with minority identities who have negative experiences with their peers. Evidence on the benefits of large-scale mentoring schemes is mixed, but if the right mentors could be carefully matched to young people, it could help relieve some of the pressures they face.
- 3. Wider opportunities for enrichment** – many of our learners have limited opportunities for external activities and travel. Some rarely go outside their local area. This can be because of the nature of their family situation, financial struggles and personal needs which can

make something very challenging that can seem simple to others, like travelling into central London or to the beach. Providing opportunities has a positive benefit for learners and their families, and this can boost aspirations and social mobility. Such opportunities do not necessarily need to travel far – for some learners, more trips to outdoor spaces would help build confidence and develop wider interests. These opportunities would also help learners to make friends and build social skills, and also to bring families together.

4. **Support with physical health** – learners at the College would like to see more opportunities for physical activity across our range of campuses. While most of our schools have good outdoor space, there are some that do not. College learners would also like LASER to consider how it can help them with nutrition and a healthy diet through education and promoting healthy eating on campus.
5. **Support with mental health** – learners struggling with mental health or who knew others who were, wanted to more access to counselling and therapy to support them as well as better education on these issues. Services are often provided on an individual basis for those learners with EHCPs but it is harder to access these for those who do not.
6. **Scholarships and wider financial support** – while our learners do not experience the level of poverty found in other areas of the country, significant numbers of our learners do have financial challenges that cannot be provided for by schools or the existing College bursary system. Groups of learners who might benefit most from a targeted increase in financial support include ESOL learners and those who are Looked After Children. This could be provided in different ways tailored to individual need and could cover not just their study with us, but extend beyond this to encourage our learners to continue their education and maximise their future prospects. Such additional support would benefit both those in our schools and College.
7. **Engagement in civic processes** – although it is not surprising that learners are less likely to agree with statements about national leaders listening to their views, than being able to make a personal difference, the levels that we saw are concerning. The College could take advantage of regular visitors we receive from politicians and government officials to find opportunities for learners to engage with them also and develop a better understanding of their work and how to effect change at a wider level.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Survey tables

Appendix 2 - Visual questionnaire used in survey

Appendix 3 - Key survey findings and comparison to national findings
from Children's Commissioner survey

Appendix 1 - Summary survey tables

You have somewhere to call home

	School	College	Total
Agree	81.5%	89.7%	89.7%
Neither agree nor disagree	3.6%	5.8%	5.8%
Disagree	5.4%	1.9%	1.9%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	9.6%	2.5%	2.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,577	1,539	3,116

You have somewhere to call home

	School	College	Total
Agree	87.1%	86.4%	86.7%
Neither agree nor disagree	4.2%	8.2%	6.2%
Disagree	2.2%	2.1%	2.2%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	6.6%	3.2%	4.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,577	1,539	3,116

Your family has everything they need to support you

	School	College	Total
Agree	86.4%	78.0%	82.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	4.1%	12.8%	8.4%
Disagree	2.7%	3.8%	3.3%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	6.8%	5.3%	6.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,568	1,539	3,107

Your family gets to spend time together

	School	College	Total
Agree	75.7%	75.4%	75.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	10.2%	14.1%	12.2%
Disagree	6.5%	5.4%	6.0%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	7.6%	5.1%	6.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,566	1,535	3,101

You have a healthy diet

	School	College	Total
Agree	62.8%	49.9%	56.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	14.1%	29.2%	21.7%
Disagree	8.6%	14.5%	11.5%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	14.4%	6.4%	10.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,571	1,564	3,135

You have someone supportive to talk to

	School	College	Total
Agree	81.3%	74.6%	78.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	5.1%	15.0%	10.0%
Disagree	4.9%	6.0%	5.4%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	8.7%	4.4%	6.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,573	1,539	3,112

You feel safe in your local area

	School	College	Total
Agree	69.1%	65.7%	67.4%
Neither agree nor disagree	12.3%	20.9%	16.6%
Disagree	9.2%	8.8%	9.0%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	9.4%	4.6%	7.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,559	1,528	3,087

You feel safe online

	School	College	Total
Agree	62.9%	73.1%	68.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	14.6%	18.4%	16.5%
Disagree	10.7%	4.1%	7.4%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	11.8%	4.4%	8.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,561	1,526	3,087

You can do fun things near where you live

	School	College	Total
Agree	80.0%	58.1%	69.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	6.8%	22.4%	14.5%
Disagree	7.0%	14.7%	10.8%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	6.2%	4.8%	5.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,562	1,528	3,090

You feel like you can make a difference to the things you care about

	School	College	Total
Agree	56.9%	61.6%	59.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	13.8%	23.1%	18.4%
Disagree	7.5%	5.5%	6.5%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	21.8%	9.9%	15.9%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,577	1,552	3,129

People who run the country listen to your views

	School	College	Total
Agree	22.5%	15.9%	19.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.5%	28.5%	22.5%
Disagree	32.0%	36.2%	34.1%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	29.1%	19.4%	24.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,576	1,552	3,128

You are treated fairly

	School	College	Total
Agree	67.8%	57.3%	62.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	12.1%	28.6%	20.3%
Disagree	10.3%	7.7%	9.0%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	9.8%	6.5%	8.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,575	1,552	3,127

You have the same opportunities as other children

	School	College	Total
Agree	55.1%	52.9%	54.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	14.5%	25.6%	20.0%
Disagree	17.1%	12.7%	14.9%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	13.3%	8.8%	11.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,578	1,552	3,130

You enjoy school/college

	School	College	Total
Agree	56.9%	48.2%	52.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	15.7%	32.7%	24.1%
Disagree	15.5%	13.0%	14.3%
Don't know/Prefer not to say	12.0%	6.1%	9.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Base	1,566	1,536	3,102



Appendix 2 – Visual questionnaire

I I am a	
 boy	
 girl	
 other	
or to say don't know or don't want to say	
Can you tick a box with a statement that you believe to be correct?	
	Yes No Not sure
	Yes No Not sure
	Yes No Not sure
	Yes No Not sure
	Yes No Not sure

Can you tick a box with a statement that you believe to be correct?														
You have someone supportive to talk to?														
You have somewhere to call home?														
You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for?														
You have great teachers who support you?														
You enjoy school?														
Can you tick a box with a statement that you believe to be correct?														
Your family has everything they need to support you?														
Your family spends time together?														
You feel safe online?														
You feel safe in your local area?														
You can do fun things near where you live?														

Appendix 3 – Key survey findings and comparison to national findings from Children’s Commissioner survey

Our learners were most likely to agree with statements about their family, home and the people they live with, and having someone supportive to talk to. This was followed by indicators about their teachers/lecturers, their local area and safety online. Fewer learners agreed with questions about receiving fair treatment, having the same opportunities, a healthy diet, or those running the country listening to their views.

The level of agreement was similar to the Children’s Commissioner survey but there were some key differences reflecting older age of our learner profile with half our responses among those aged 16 and over. Responses from the schools were similar to those in the Children’s Commissioner survey.

Bearing in mind this age difference, our learners as a whole were more likely to agree that they could make a difference to the things they cared about, but less likely to say they enjoyed school/college, had the same opportunities as other children or had a healthy diet. Although our learners were less likely to agree that they enjoyed school and college they were just as likely to agree that they had great teachers or lecturers who supported them (and more likely in the case of our school).

Table 1.1 Survey indicators of wellbeing by level of agreement for our education group, %

Indicator	College	Schools	Education Group	Children’s Commissioner	Difference between our education group and Children’s Commissioner
You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	86	87	87	93	-6
You have somewhere to call home	90	82	86	93	-7
Your family has everything they need to support you	78	86	82	85	-3
You have someone supportive to talk to	75	81	78	82	-4
Your family gets to spend time together	75	76	76	84	-8
You have great teachers/lecturers who support you	70	80	75	76	-1
You can do fun things near where you live	58	80	69	70	-1
You feel safe online	73	63	68	71	-3
You feel safe in your local area	66	69	67	73	-6
You are treated fairly	57	68	63	70	-7
You feel like you can make a difference to the things you care about	62	57	59	52	7
You have a healthy diet	50	63	56	73	-17
You have the same opportunities as other children	53	55	54	70	-16
You enjoy school/college	48	57	52	64	-12
People who run the country listen to your views	16	22	19	22	-3



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