



# What young people in Rotherham told us about their wellbeing in 2025

March 2025

**healthwatch**  
Rotherham

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## About us

Healthwatch Rotherham is the independent champion for people who use health and social care services in Rotherham. We are here to make sure that those running services put people at the heart of care.

Our sole purpose is to understand the needs, experiences and concerns of people who use health and social care services and to speak out on their behalf. We focus on ensuring that people's worries and concerns about current services are addressed and work to get services right for the future.

## Background to the study

Between April 2024 and March 2025, we have attended 12 student events, engaging with young people across Rotherham to find out what matters to them, what challenges they face and to identify what services can do to help support them with their wellbeing.

### We visited:

- Rotherham College
- Willows School
- Landmarks Specialist College
- Dearne Valley College
- Thomas Rotherham College



We have spoken to **445** young people whose feedback has formed this report.

### We gathered feedback through:

- Attending college wellbeing events
- Organising and delivering Let's Talk information sessions
- Regular engagement with schools
- Small focus groups
- Questionnaires

## Listening to the voice of young people



Although children and young people make up a third of the population of England, their opinions about their wellbeing and how best to keep them happy and healthy aren't always heard. It is vital to engage with young people to identify barriers that affect their wellbeing, to help them get the support they need to prevent issues from escalating and to promote healthy habits to take into adulthood.

In South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw, the [Children and Young People's Alliance](#) (CYP Alliance) was established in July 2021, which aims to improve the health outcomes, and reduce inequalities, for children and young people aged 0–25 years. Working with service providers and young people, one of their aims is to amplify the voice of children and young people, making sure that they help direct decision making at the highest level.

The CYP Alliance worked with the South Yorkshire Integrated Care Board (ICB) and local Healthwatch to ensure that children and young people's views were heard as part of the [Start with People: South Yorkshire Strategy](#), which was refreshed in 2024. This strategy outlines how the ICB will listen and involve local communities to make sure that local NHS and care services meet the needs of those who live in South Yorkshire.

A consultation with 84 young people conducted through the CYP Alliances partnership with the Child Health Equity Collaborative in 2023, highlighted 8 main areas which young people wanted help in to enable them to live well:

## Listening to children's voices

To provide young people access to mental health services in and outside of educational settings for children aged 0-25.

Young people want to have tools, resources, and techniques that help them build and maintain routines.

Young people want to develop more life skills in education and more support to access opportunities and experiences for their future aspirations.

Young people want more support and awareness surrounding unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as vaping.

Young people want to develop their skills in meal preparation, cooking, and healthy eating.

It is important for young people to feel loved, understood, and heard by the communities and spaces they are a part of.

Young people want a healthy balance between academic pressure and meaningful activity.

Young people want a healthy standard of living such as an adequate income.

Summary findings from the Chilipep consultation with 84 young people in July 2023

The [Children and Young People's Insights Report](#) published by the [Children and Young People's Health Equity Collaborative \(CHEC\)](#) in 2024, had similar findings from the research they did with young people, and focuses on three main aspects:

- Home – which looked at the local area, poverty, family environment and support and quality of housing.
- Community – including feeling connected to their local environment, culture and heritage and digital communities including social media.
- Education – with a focus on lesson content, bullying and discrimination policy and practice, teaching quality, school environment and support available.

From the report, they have developed a [framework](#) to improve healthcare, reduce inequalities and support improved wellbeing, quality of life and opportunities for children and young people affected by disadvantage in South Yorkshire.

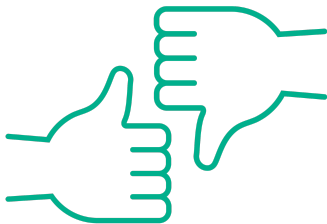
All this work highlights the importance of listening and working with young people to ensure that services meet their needs, now and in the future.

## Wellbeing is important to young people

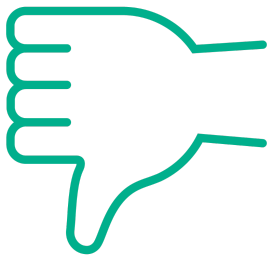
The young people we spoke to are very aware of what wellbeing means to them and the important part it plays in how they can cope with day to day situations, as well as the potential impact it can have on their future. When we asked them if they thought their wellbeing was important:



**88%** thought it was important



**8%** thought it was neither important or unimportant



**4%** thought it was unimportant

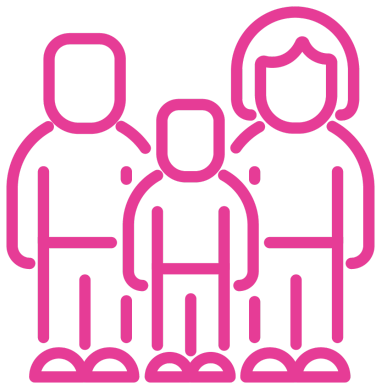
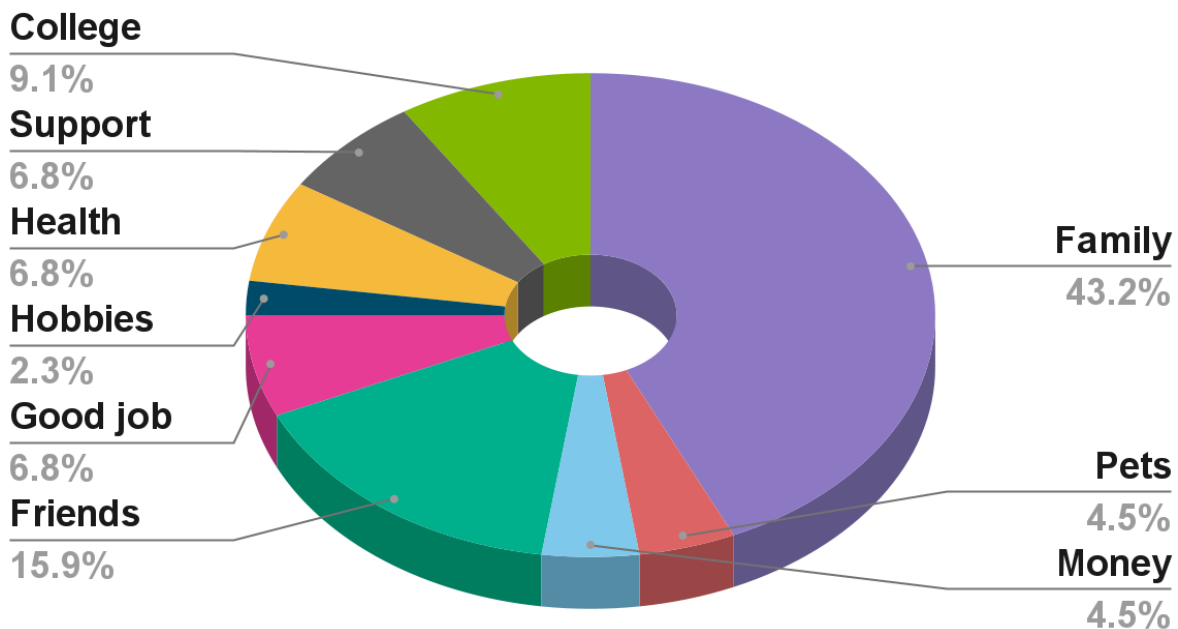
If I don't [look after my wellbeing], I feel down and can't cope talking to people

I believe if my mental wellbeing is not good, my physical wellbeing will deteriorate

Cause if your not looking after yourself, you can't achieve a lot

## Good relationships with others are key

The young people we spoke to told us their family and friends are the most important thing to them. However, the role college plays in their lives is also important, which potentially could be linked to the fact that getting a good job matters to them, and college is key in achieving this. Interestingly, support was mentioned by nearly 7% of those we spoke to which ties in with the [Children and Young People’s Insights Report](#) as young people see the support they get from family, friends and at college as central to them maintaining good wellbeing.



**Nearly 60% of all the young people we asked said that their friends and family matters the most to them.**

This theme was continued when we asked “**What makes you happy?**”. Friends, boyfriends, girlfriends and family were the most popular responses and it is clear to see the value young people place on the relationships around them.



Despite technology playing a large part in the lives of young people, this didn't feature at all. Apart from relationships with others, it was pets, sleep and activities that the young people we spoke to enjoyed. There is evidence supporting how all of these can help improve wellbeing, with articles highlighting the [therapeutic effect of pets](#) on people, helping to reduce stress and anxiety, as well as [helping with emotional and social skills](#). Getting sufficient [sleep](#) and [participation in sport](#) are also shown to improve mental health and wellbeing, which supports why young people would consider them as something that makes them happy.



## Young people face multiple pressures

We asked young people about what pressures both they and their peers face in Rotherham. The responses show that young people face multiple pressures which could impact their wellbeing.

The high numbers of young people telling us exams, family problems, friendship issues and peer pressure are issues is particularly worrying, as these are the areas (family, friends, college) which they told us matter the most to them and make them the happiest. If there are pressures in these areas, then wellbeing is likely to be affected. It is important that young people have different support options available to them, so if they are struggling in an area where they would normally go for support, they have alternative access to appropriate help.

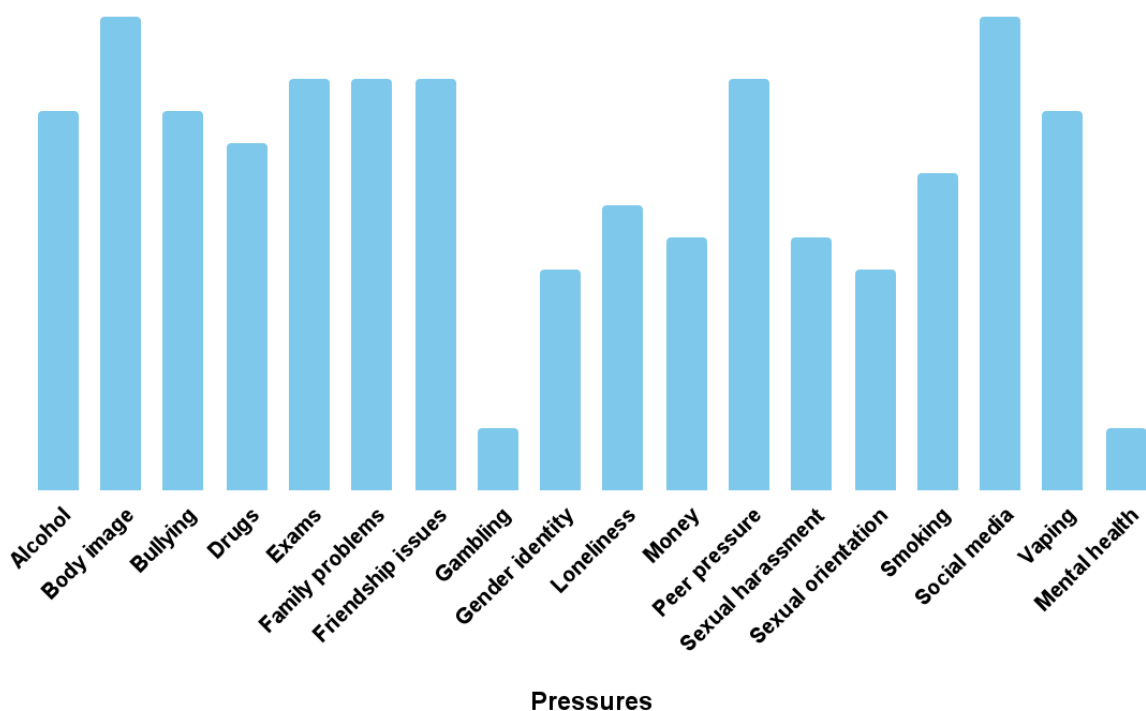
Body image and social media were highlighted as the two biggest sources of pressure to the young people we spoke to. With [99% of UK young people spending time online](#), social media use is part of everyday life. There are many well documented [negative impacts](#) from the use of social media, including links to increased risk of anxiety, depression, self harm and even suicidal ideology. The pressure to be online and available 24/7 has led to some [local schools banning phone use](#) during the day, in an attempt to improve the focus of young people and reduce the pressure on them to respond to multiple notifications.

Social media also plays a role in the pressures young people face surrounding body image, with unrealistic, filtered and altered photos driving unhealthy obsessions with their appearance. Many young people compare themselves to the images they see and when they feel they don't 'measure up' to these, it impacts their self esteem and mental wellbeing.

However, social media can also play a part in supporting wellbeing by helping young people maintain connections with friends and family, even when they are physically apart. Given that we have been told that these

relationships are key to their wellbeing, this positive impact shouldn't be disregarded.

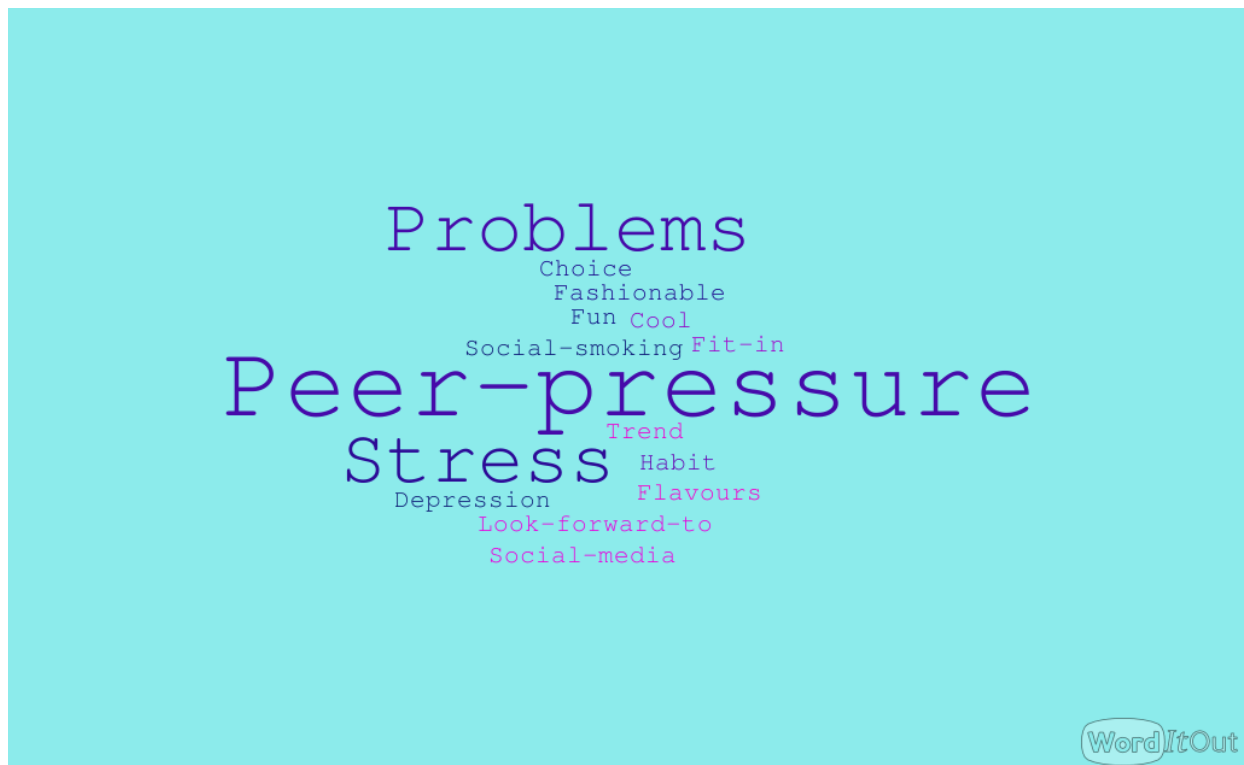
It is important that young people are provided with support to recognise when social media use is unhealthy and to be able to identify fake news and imagery. From 2020, schools have been required to cover social media use in lessons, but having access to trusted adults or family to talk through any questions or concerns, or access to reliable, accurate information is also important to help undo the negative effects of social media use on young people.



In response to the pressures young people face around smoking and vaping, we have worked together with local colleges to deliver Let's Talk events on the subject. The talks have allowed us to deliver up to date, reliable and factual information to young people. whilst signposting them to helpful local and national services. As part of our engagements, we also worked with Public Health in Rotherham to gather the opinions of young people in regards to developing smoke free zones as part of

Rotherham’s redevelopment, which will hopefully benefit the whole community in the future.

These events have also helped develop our understanding of the factors that influence young people to take up the habit, with peer pressure and a way to deal with stress and problems being the biggest influences identified.



Peer pressure and problems also link to the response we got to our question **‘What do you find difficult?’**.

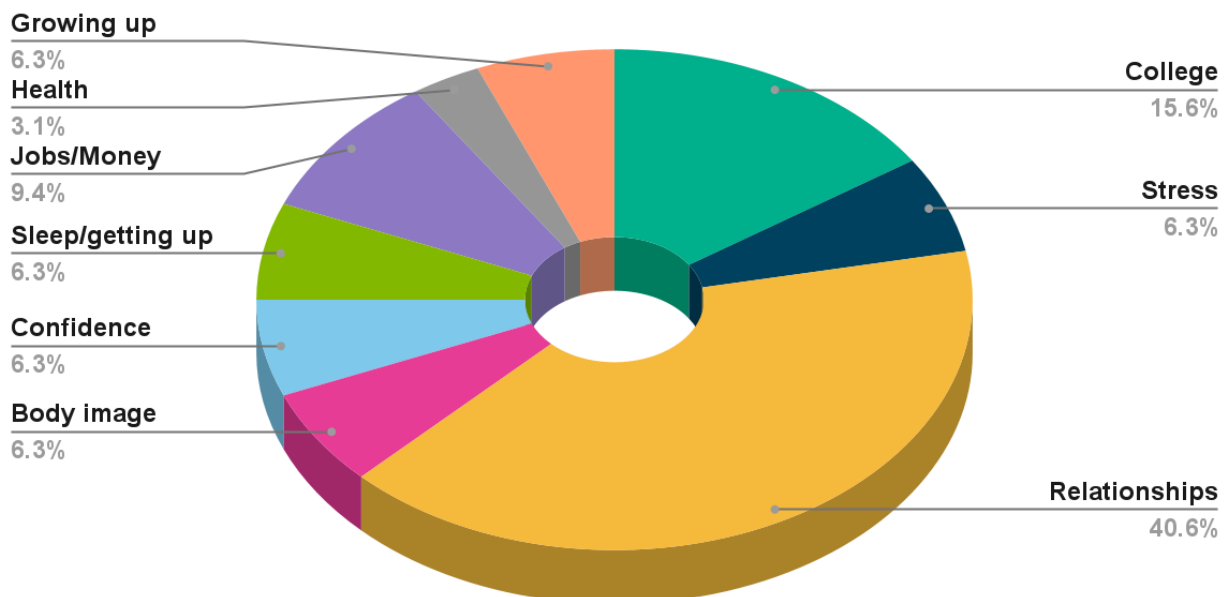
# 46%

of the young people we spoke to said

socialising, friendships,  
relationships, speaking to  
people and confidence

were the things they found most difficult

Connectivity with others is beneficial to wellbeing but many of the young people we spoke to identified this as an area they found most difficult. Problems finding the confidence to socialise with others, handling the complexities of romantic or sexual relationships or dealing with friendship issues, can be made worse by peer pressure. Whilst good relationships are beneficial to the wellbeing of young people, difficult relationships can have the reverse effect.



Good relationships can help young people build their confidence and self worth, helping them deal with problems and resist peer pressure. However, where these positive relationships are lacking, education can help young people develop their own identity, decide their own values and challenge negative influences. Our work with young people at local schools and colleges helps us to contribute to the provision of reliable information, and support young people to make positive life choices to help their wellbeing.

Although confidence was a difficulty identified by some of the young people we spoke to, when we asked **'Do you feel confident speaking up for yourself?'**:



**48%** said 'yes'



**17%** said 'sometimes'



**35%** said 'no'

Those who weren't, or sometimes weren't confident told us:

Sometimes I feel like it doesn't need to be voiced

Sometimes feel confident to speak up easier when 1-1. Other times it's hard, especially with big groups of people

Hard to say what I feel out loud

Sometimes it's easier not to talk and just listen

## Sleep is an issue

We spend around a third of our lives asleep and sleeping is essential to maintain good mental and physical health. A lack of sleep is associated with higher risks of:

- **autoimmune disease**
- **cancer**
- **cardiovascular disease**
- **low mood and irritability**
- **dementia**
- **poorer wellbeing**
- **sensitivity to emotional and stressful events**

The amount of sleep each individual needs varies from person to person, however, general recommendations for young people are:

- **1-12 months old - 14-15 hours per day**
- **1-3 years old - 12-14 hours per day**
- **3-6 years old - 10-12 hours per day**
- **7-12 years old - 10-11 hours per day**
- **12-18 years old - 8-9 hours per day**
- **Over 18 years old - 7-9 hours per day**

As most of the young people we engaged with were 6th form/college age, we wanted to find out if they were getting the recommended amount of sleep for their age group, and if they weren't, whether they thought this was having an impact on them. We asked them:

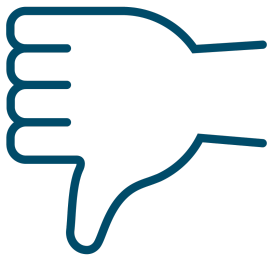
## Do you get between 8-10 hours sleep a night?



**16%** said 'always'



**52%** said 'sometimes'



**32%** said 'never'

Some of those who told us they 'sometimes' or 'never' got the recommended amount of sleep, gave us their reasons:

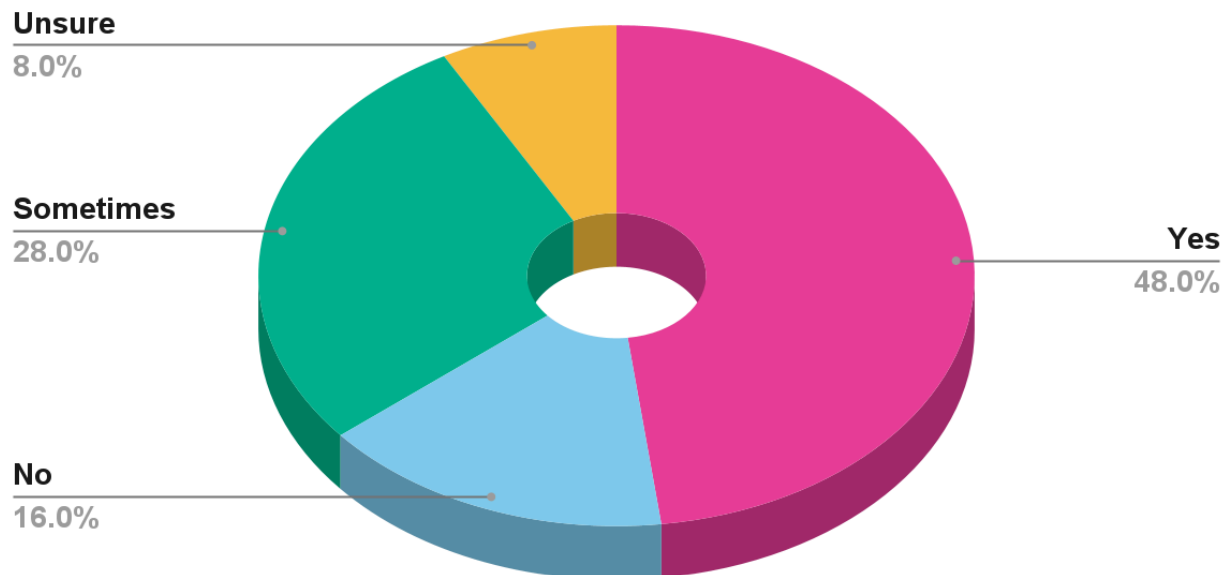
Sometimes I'm tired, sometimes I'm not

Overthinking

Don't sleep because of worrying

Getting work done

We then asked **‘Does the amount of sleep you get affect your wellbeing?’**



**76%**

**thought that the amount of sleep they get either affected their wellbeing or that it sometimes did**

Some identified the impact of not having enough sleep had on them, with tiredness being linked to low mood, a lack of willingness to engage with others, raised stress levels and low motivation:



***“Sometimes if I’m tired, I can have a low mood”***







***“Makes me angry and not motivated”***

***“It makes me in a mood and unhappy to speak to people”***

***“Hard to concentrate and focus”***



As well as being told on other engagements how sleep was something that made young people happy, others told us of the connection they felt between getting plenty of sleep and their ability to face the day:



***The more sleep I get, I feel I have more energy and I’m happier during the day longer***



Interestingly, one young person told us how they felt that too much sleep had a negative effect on their wellbeing, which highlights that everyone’s individual needs are very different.



***The more I sleep, the more drowsy and anxious I become***



With sleep having such an impact on the wellbeing of young people, we have put together a Let’s talk on the subject to deliver to schools and colleges in Rotherham. Further information and advice on sleep for teens and young people can be found on [The Sleep Charity](#) website.

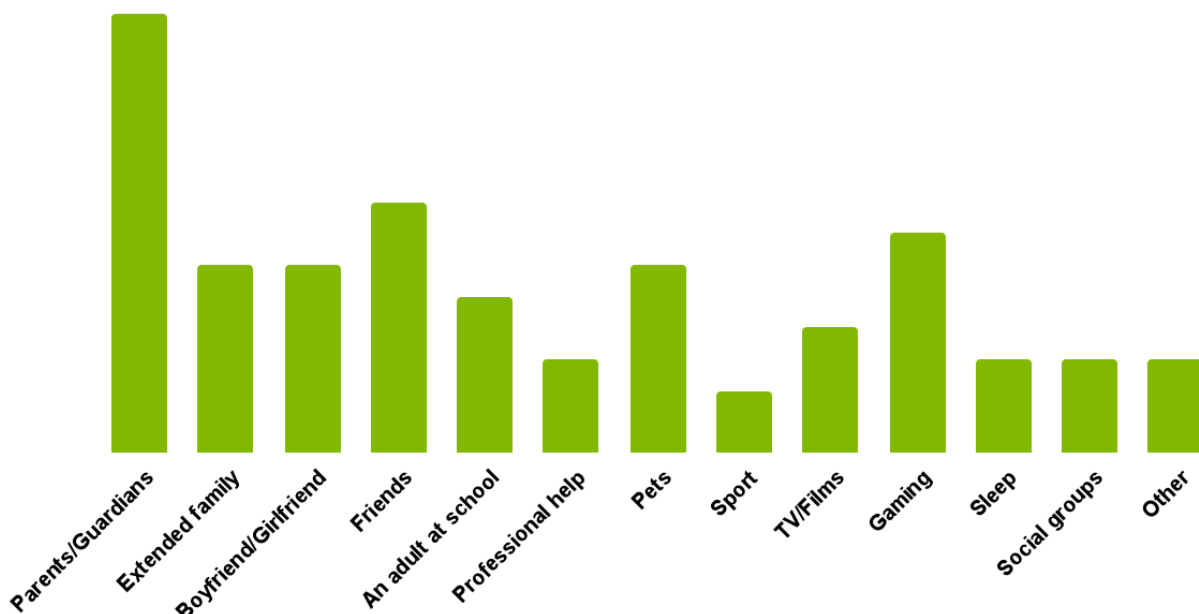
## Young people don't know enough about services

One thing we heard time and time again through our engagement with young people, was that they don't know what services there are available to help them.

Whilst all the young people we spoke to told us they had someone, or something, that they turned to if they were unhappy, more than half were unsure who they could go to if they needed extra help.

We heard parents and guardians are the ones who most young people go to when they're feeling unhappy, with friends also providing support. Gaming was also mentioned by a number of young people as something they turned to when they were sad, but it is unclear whether this is because it is used as escapism, or whether it allows them to access friendship support online.

### Who (or what) do you turn to if you're unhappy?



Who/What would you turn to?

However, when we asked young people **'If you needed extra help with your wellbeing, would you know who to turn to?'**

**53%**

**said they didn't know where to turn for extra help**

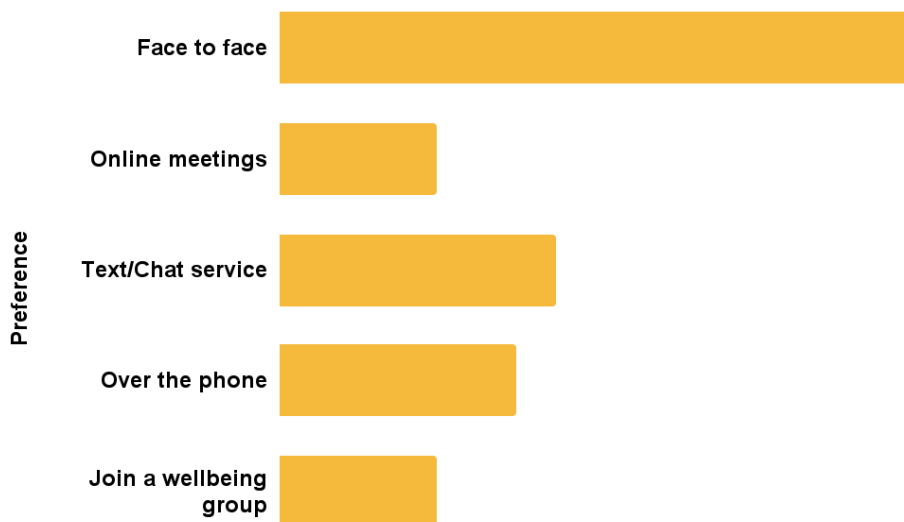
Although some young people turn to reliable sources for extra help, such as family, doctors and mentors, some told us that they turn to online sources and Google. Undoubtedly these do provide a degree of information, but reliability and accuracy is not guaranteed and without proper support, there is potential for further damage to wellbeing rather than gaining appropriate help.

Interestingly, when we held a Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) focus group, those young people were far more confident that they would know who to turn to for extra help, with **5 out of 7** saying they knew who to turn to. This may be helped through the strong relationships built up between them and support/mentor staff at college, who they know they can turn to for support and advice.

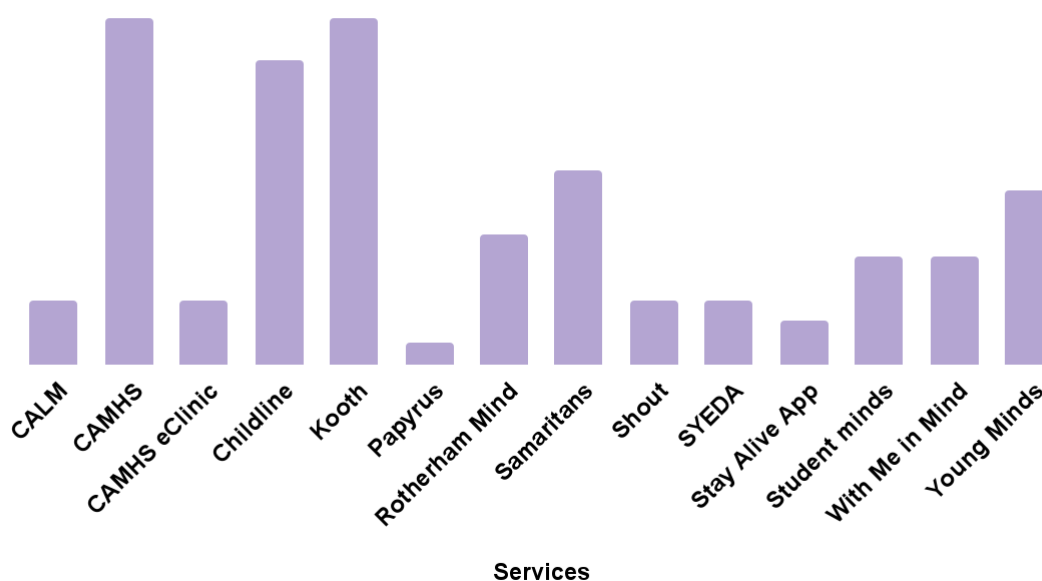
Surprisingly, when we asked young people **'If you need extra support with your wellbeing, how would you prefer to get it?'**, the majority said they'd rather have help face to face.

Many services currently set up to support young people involve online, webchat, text and telephone support, with few offering face to face sessions. Whilst this provides great support to some young people who would struggle to access face to face help, consideration should maybe

be given to offering in person support as well, to allow young people to access help in the way that suits them best.

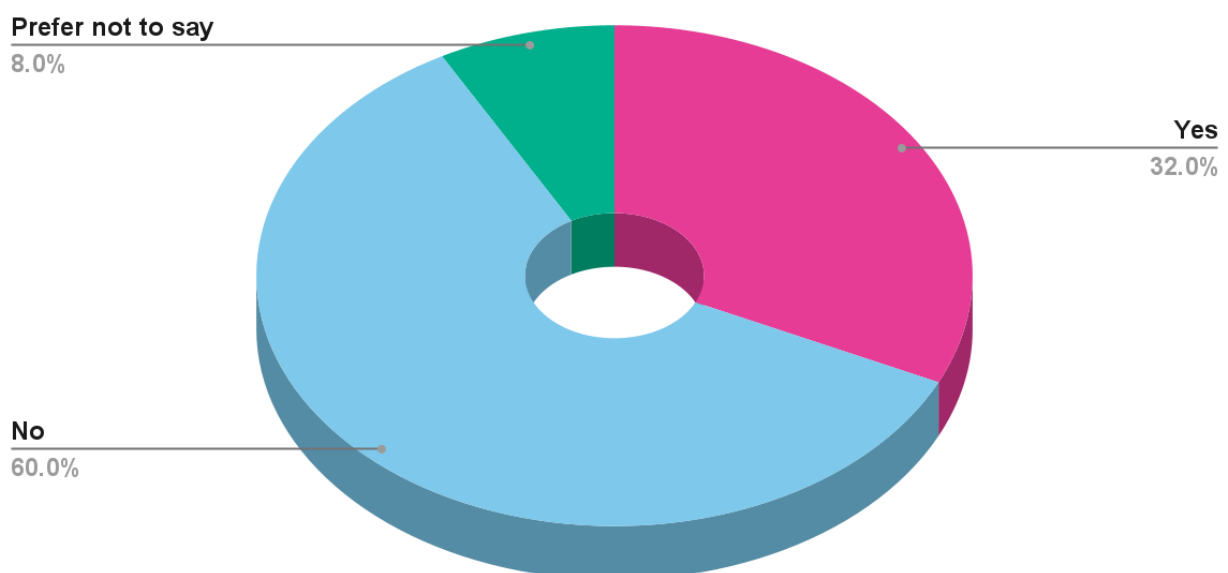


When we asked **'Which of these young people's services have you heard of?'**, it was clear that there are some services that are better known to young people than others:



[CAMHS](#), [Childline](#) and [Kooth](#) are particularly well known to the young people we spoke to. Whilst CAMHS and Childline are likely to be well known due to national coverage, Kooth has been promoting their services in local schools and colleges, delivering talks, handing out posters and attending wellbeing events. This direct engagement is likely to be the reason why young people are so aware of this service and it is maybe something that other services may wish to consider in order to raise their profile.

When we asked the young people **‘Have you used any of these services?’**, the majority hadn’t. Of those who had used them, most had



used CAMHS or Kooth, with just a few using [Young Minds](#), [With Me in Mind](#), [Samaritans](#), [Rotherham Mind](#) and the [Stay Alive App](#).

Although we heard that young people don’t know where to turn for extra help, the recent [investigation of the NHS in England](#) by Lord Darzi, also highlighted the problems in meeting the growing demand for services for young people.

Studies have shown that [young people's mental health deteriorated at a greater rate during the pandemic](#) and there is now a [growing gap between the demand and capacity for services](#). Under the current [NHS Five Year Joint Forward Plan](#) one of the focuses is to improve services for children and young people.

It is not possible to say whether so few of the young people we spoke to accessed services due to lack of awareness or lack of capacity, but it is likely that both are a factor. Whilst online services provide support with minimal to no waiting times, some services such as [CAMHS in Rotherham](#), [currently have a long wait time for neurodevelopmental \(ASD/ADHD\) assessments](#) due to high demand. Although help and support can be accessed whilst waiting for an assessment through other local services such as [Rotherham Parent Carer Forum](#), [SEND local offer Rotherham](#) and [SENDIASS](#), there is likely to be an impact on young people's wellbeing as a result of the wait.

To address the lack of awareness around services, we put together a [Young people's directory](#) containing a list of services, local and national, that young people could use. As well as putting it on our website, a QR code poster was sent to every secondary school, 6th form and college in Rotherham, to be displayed so that students could access the directory. The directory covers a range of topics such as:

- \*mental health
- \*physical health
- \*sexual health
- \*drugs & alcohol
- \*bereavement
- \*young carers
- \*abuse
- \*homelessness
- \* SEND
- \*LGBT
- \* cancer
- \*gambling
- \*volunteering
- \*general information

## SEND focus on 5 Ways to Wellbeing

In 2025/26, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) have been asked to prioritise adults, children and young people with complex health and social care needs who require support from multiple services and organisations.

Ahead of this, we have regularly engaged with students who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) to provide information sessions and to find out what matters most to them.

We have tied this work into Rotherham Council's 5 Ways to Wellbeing focus, which encourages everyone to take five easy steps that can be included in daily life to look after their wellbeing.

The 5 Ways to Wellbeing are:

1. **Be active**



2. **Connect**



3. **Give**



4. **Keep learning**



5. **Take notice**



**Be Active:**

Regular physical activity is good not only for physical health, but also benefits overall wellbeing. Physical activity releases '[happy hormones](#)' which helps boost energy and improve moods. It doesn't have to be intense exercise like running or going to the gym, playing in the garden, having a dance, walking the dog or walking round the shops with friends count!

[Being active can help physical and mental wellbeing](#) by helping you to:

- **manage stress**
- **improve sleep**
- **improve mood**
- **improve confidence**
- **connect with nature**
- **socialise and meet new people**
- **managing symptoms of depression and anxiety**
- **memory and brain functioning**
- **heart, muscle and bone health**
- **reducing the risk of developing some long term health conditions**

We asked the young people attending the Landmarks Specialist College Independence Fest if they are active and what sort of activities they do. They told us:

**4**

liked running

**1**

liked cycling





3

liked gymnastics



7

liked walking



5

liked football



2

liked swimming



4

liked basketball/Netball



5

liked dancing



7

liked walking the dog



1

liked horse riding

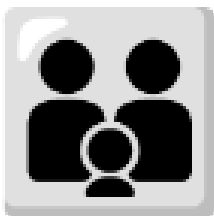
None of the young people we spoke to did no physical activity which was great to hear! Although a lot liked unorganised activities like walking the dog, there were several who liked group activities such as football, netball/basketball and gymnastics. [Rotherham SEND Local Offer](#) has details of lots of organised activities including football, walks, youth clubs, holiday camps and dancing suitable for a range of age groups.

## Connect:

Being connected to others, whether it be family, friends, colleagues or just those we live around, is very important to wellbeing. Good relationships provide support and build a sense of belonging. Those with strong social connections are more likely to be happier, physically healthier, live longer and generally have fewer mental health problems. In contrast, social isolation and loneliness is known to increase the risk of:

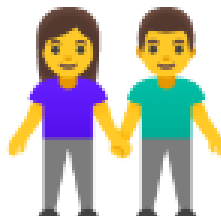
- **heart disease and stroke**
- **type 2 diabetes**
- **depression and anxiety**
- **feeling suicidal and self harm**
- **dementia**
- **earlier death**

We spoke again to the young people attending the Landmarks Specialist College Independence Fest to find out who they like to spend their time with, to see how connected they are to others, and who is most important to them. In line with what we heard throughout our other engagements, family and friends were who they most liked to spend time with. Their answers were:



11

said family



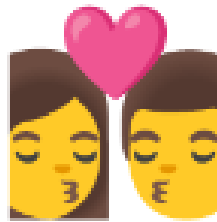
10

said friends



8

said dog



3

said boyfriend/Girlfriend



4

said cat



2

said neighbours



4

People at a social group you attend



### **Give:**

Studies have shown that simple acts of kindness can lead to improvements in wellbeing. Simply saying ‘thank you’, complimenting someone or just smiling at others can help people feel connected, [reduce stress, improve self esteem and happiness](#).

Volunteering is a great way to give back to the community, build relationships and give individuals a sense of belonging and self worth. There are many opportunities for young people to volunteer, whether it is working in local charity shops, helping out at local [parkruns](#) or taking part in the [National Citizen Service \(NCS\)](#) opportunities during the summer holidays. [Volunteering England](#) has links to lots of websites containing volunteer opportunities as well as helpful information and advice.

## **Keep learning:**

The young people we have engaged with through the year have all been enrolled at schools and colleges where they continuously learn and grow, developing their self esteem and confidence whilst having plenty of social interaction opportunities. Learning, whether provided formally in school or informally throughout life, is key to good wellbeing. Learning new skills or taking up new hobbies can help people lead a more fulfilling and positive life.

Back in January, we ran an art workshop with a group of young people at Willows school to look more closely at the 5 Ways to Wellbeing, getting them to produce their own artwork on the theme.



They produced some fantastic pieces of work that were then turned into a brilliant display board for them all to see and refer back to! Things that they identified as important to their wellbeing ranged from family and pets, to hobbies and the staff who support them so well at the Willows.



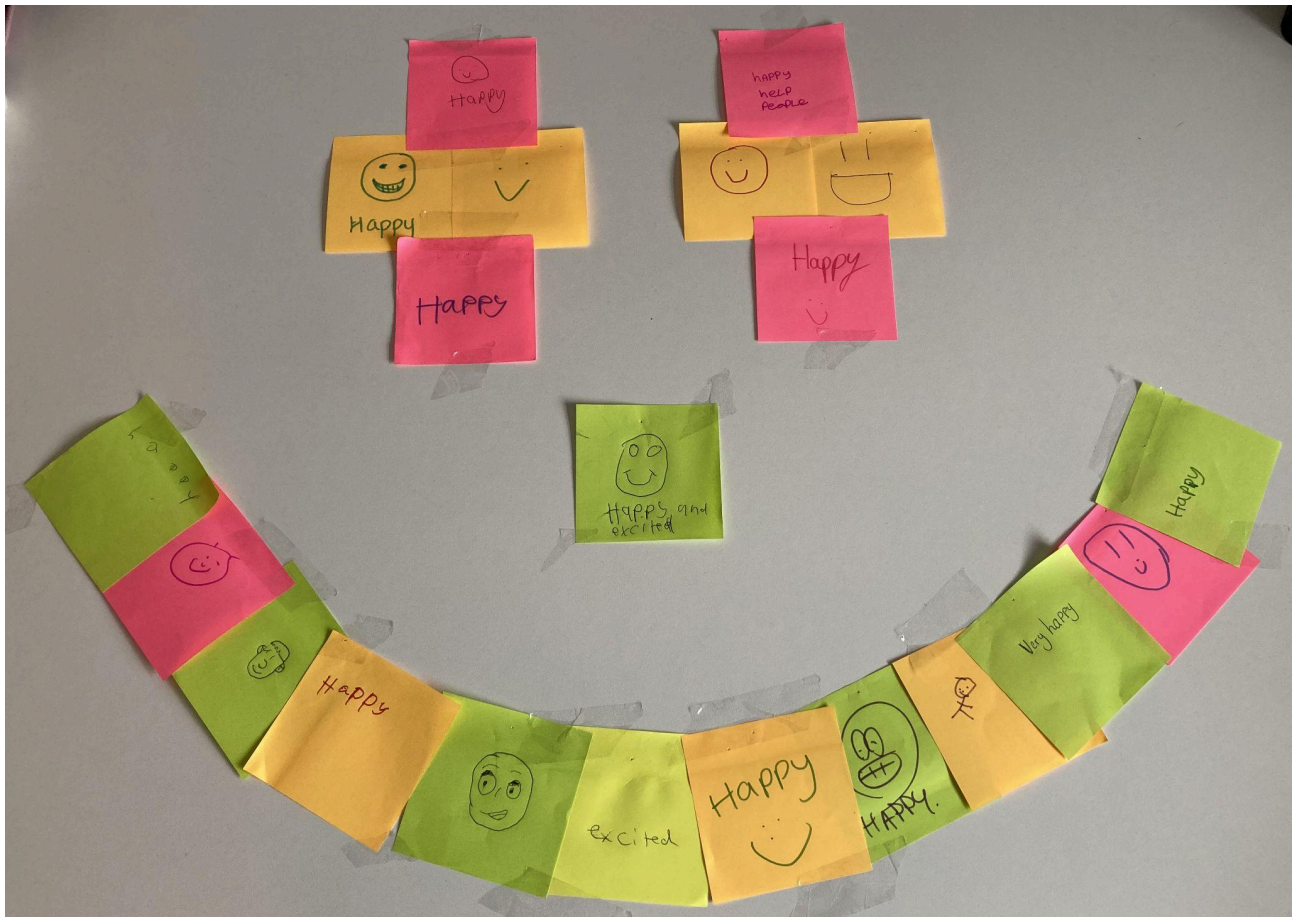
**Take notice:**

One of the things that the 5 Ways to Wellbeing promotes is to take notice of the here and now, and try to worry less about what has happened in the past or what may happen in the future.

Studies have shown that people who can live more in the present, are more likely to have improved mental health, feel less stressed and have better wellbeing.

At the Landmarks Specialist College Independence Fest event we had the opportunity to get the young people there to take 2 minutes to think about

how they felt at that moment in time. We asked them to draw emoji's or write a word to describe how they felt. Overwhelmingly, the young people drew a smiley face emoji or wrote the word happy.



As a result of the work that we did with Willows school on the 5 Ways to Wellbeing, we have identified that this work would be beneficial to all young people and we have worked on developing a Let's talk on the subject that we can present to other local schools and colleges.

## What action has been taken from the feedback we have received?

As a result of all that we have heard over the past year, we have taken action to help address some of the areas of need that have been identified:

- We have produced a Young people's directory, listing local and national services available to help young people improve their wellbeing. As well as it being available on our website, posters advertising the directory have been sent to all local secondary schools, 6th Forms and colleges for them to display. We also take handouts with the link on them to all engagements.
- We have worked with the South Yorkshire ICB to ensure that young people's voices were heard as part of their Start with People Strategy refresh.
- We have worked with colleges to deliver Let's talk events on smoking and vaping.
- We have developed a Let's talk event on the 5 Ways to Wellbeing.
- We are helping to deliver Let's talk events on sleeping.

## What still needs to be done?

Listening to the experiences and feedback of young people is not a one off project and we will continue to engage and build our relationships with local schools, colleges and 6th forms.

It is essential that young people receive the support they need, and it was clear from our research that not all services are managing to promote the help and resources they provide well enough. Local services should consider building better relationships with local schools, colleges, 6th forms and youth social groups to raise awareness of the help available to

young people. Looking at social media promotion could also be considered as a way to get their services more recognised.

We have also realised that body image is quite a big pressure for many young people and we are looking to develop a Let's talk on this subject that we can deliver, either in partnership with other organisations, or on our own, to local schools, colleges and 6th forms.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Rotherham College, Dearne Valley College, the Willows school, Thomas Rotherham College and Landmarks Specialist College for allowing us to spend time talking to their fantastic students, who were always engaged, enthusiastic and honest with their feedback.

We would also like to thank all the young people who took the time to speak to us, to complete our surveys and take part in our activities. Your willingness to take part has allowed us to gain some insight into what is important to you and how we can help to improve things.