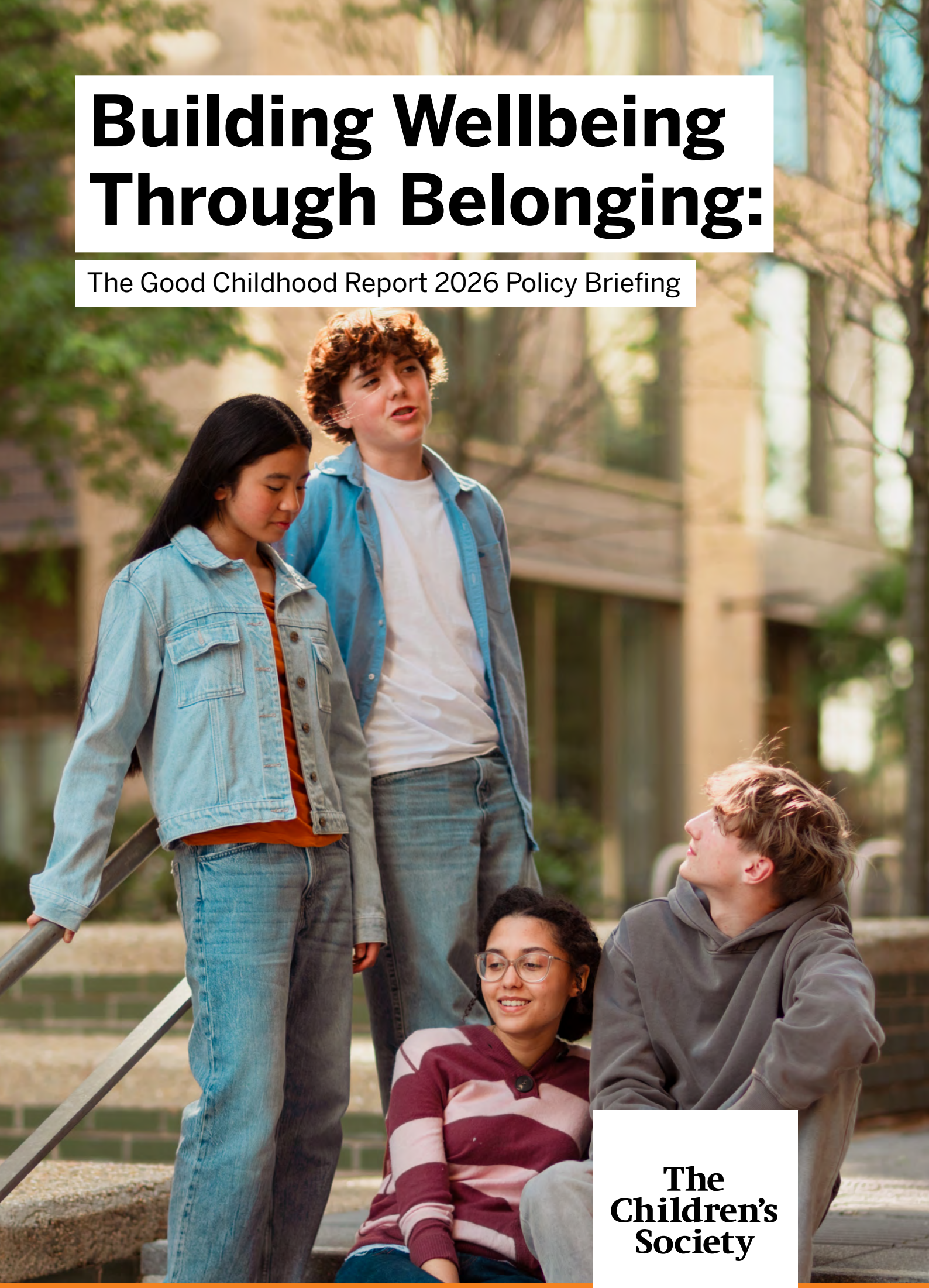
Building Wellbeing Through Belonging:

The Good Childhood Report 2026 Policy Briefing



The Children's Society

Introduction

Young people's wellbeing is shaped not only by individual circumstances, but by whether they feel connected to the people, places and communities around them. The Good Childhood Report 2026 demonstrates a strong relationship between belonging and wellbeing: young people who lack a sense of belonging, or do not have a trusted adult to turn to, are more likely to experience low wellbeing.

Belonging is not just a positive outcome in its own right; it is a protective factor. Our research suggests that when young people feel connected to communities, they are more likely to experience positive wellbeing and develop supportive relationships, allowing them to access help when they need it. Conversely, when young people feel disconnected or isolated, they are at heightened risk of poor mental health and exploitation, and they may even begin to withdraw from education and activities.

The encouraging finding from this year's research is that the building blocks of belonging are already well understood. Young people consistently highlighted the importance of having access to trusted adults, welcoming places, meaningful opportunities to participate, and support that is easy to navigate. Policymaking on these areas is progressing, yet it still lacks a comprehensive and cohesive approach for ensuring that every young person can feel like they belong.

The recommendations that follow set out a practical agenda for strengthening belonging through four interconnected areas: **People, Places, Power** and **Pathways.**

Recommendations at a glance

The Children's Society's recommendations are centred around four Ps of belonging: **People, Places, Power** and **Pathways**.

Young people need:

- **People** they trust
- **Places** they belong
- **Power** to influence decisions
- **Pathways** to opportunities and support.

We are calling on Government to:

People

1. **Embed trusted adults within local youth systems** rather than creating new standalone structures, ensuring they are part of a coherent local support offer.

2. **Deliver a National Trusted Adults Framework** that sets out what high-quality trusted adult support looks like across different settings, while allowing for local flexibility.

Places

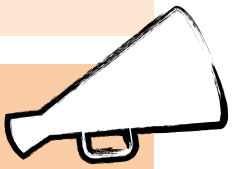
3. **Publish guidance on Teen-Friendly Communities** to create places where young people feel welcome and set out a local entitlement to the spaces, support and opportunities that foster belonging.

4. **Strengthen open-access community hubs** as welcoming spaces that promote belonging, wellbeing and early support.

5. **Review the youth services statutory duty,** including developing a clearer definition of what constitutes "sufficient" youth provision.

6. **Deliver long-term funding certainty for youth services,** including assessing the impact of multi-year funding settlements and publishing a recovery trajectory for youth services investment.

Power



7. **Make youth participation a core expectation of nationally-funded youth services,** with proportionate approaches to ensuring young people help shape the services and opportunities available to them.

8. **Introduce a National Wellbeing Measurement** to improve understanding of children's wellbeing and inform national and local decision-making.

Pathways

9. **Create a national Waiting Well offer** to ensure young people can access the support, activities, trusted adults and clear information they need while waiting for mental health support.

10. **Support delivery of the Enrichment Framework for Schools and Colleges** ensuring that all education settings offer high-quality and inclusive enrichment opportunities.

11. **Build connected local support systems** by publishing a long-term plan setting out how new youth initiatives are integrated with existing local services through clear referral pathways and a "no wrong door" approach.

The Children's Society is calling on the Government to deliver these recommendations so we can begin to reverse the worrying decline in children's wellbeing and ensure that every young person across the country feels like they belong.

People

Every young person should have a trusted adult who helps them feel like they belong. While young people today encounter more adults across a multitude of settings than they ever did before, access to adults does not always mean access to safe, trusted relationships. As the world young people are growing up in changes, so too do the relationships they need to help them feel safe and supported.

What the evidence shows us

The Good Childhood Report 2026 found that belonging is shaped by the quality of their relationships and interactions with trusted adults. Young people described belonging as being able to trust and be trusted by those around them, feeling supported and feeling safe and secure.

Young people told us that having someone to turn to when life feels difficult can have a significant positive impact on their wellbeing and mental health. *Over one in five (21.7%) young people with low wellbeing did not have an adult to turn to, compared with just 6.1% of those who did not report low wellbeing.*

***"Although I have [people I could turn to] like at home and at school, outside on the streets or like in the local community centre, there's nobody there."* – Young person**

Young people and professionals both emphasised that trust is not created by a title alone. Relationships are built through

consistency, reliability, honesty, listening and follow-through. Young people valued adults who took the time to both listen and act.

"It's very important to have people who you trust and like, you know, that are going to listen to you and what you're going to say."
– Young person

Professionals described trusted adults as more than sources of emotional support. They act as role models, mentors and navigators who help connect young people with opportunities and services. They also play a key role in creating spaces where young people can build connections and develop a sense of belonging beyond their immediate environment.

The evidence suggests that trusted adults are most effective when they are part of a wider network of local support. While they can provide a vital first point of contact, they must also be able to help young people access further support when needed. This highlights the importance of viewing trusted adults as part of a broader community ecosystem that helps young people build supportive relationships and feel connected to their communities.

Turning ambition into action

The Government's commitment to building a more preventative state, alongside its £15 million investment in trusted adults through the National Youth Strategy, presents a valuable opportunity to strengthen the role of trusted adults within local systems of support.

Many trusted adults already exist across schools, youth services, community organisations, faith groups and health services. However, there is currently no shared national framework setting out what high-quality trusted adult support looks like. As a result, practice varies between settings and local areas, and young people's experiences can differ significantly. Alongside improving the quality and consistency of trusted adult support, there is also an opportunity to increase its visibility so that young people can more easily identify trusted adults and seek support when they need it.

As local areas develop new approaches through Young Futures Hubs and wider youth infrastructure, there is an opportunity to embed trusted adults within these emerging systems. Building on existing local partnerships, while creating a more consistent national approach, would help trusted adults play a more consistent role in guiding young people through local support systems and ensuring they receive help when they need it.

RECOMMENDATION 1:
Embed trusted adults within local youth systems

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should support local authorities to cordinate trusted adult provision through existng local partnerships rather than create new standalone structures. Trusted adults should be embedded within the places and services that young people already use, forming part of a coherent local support offer.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should support local areas to:

- embed trusted adults within Young Futures Hubs and wider youth services
- develop simple referral pathways between trusted adults and specialist services
- work with local systems to strengthen coordination and signposting across all areas of children's lives, including within education, health and community services.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Deliver a National Trusted Adults Framework

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should use its committed investment in trusted adults to develop a National Trusted Adults Framework, setting out what high-quality trusted adult support looks like across different settings, while allowing for local and regional flexibility. The Framework should focus on strengthening the quality and visibility of trusted adults, building on existing provision rather than creating new roles.

The framework should:

- define the core characteristics of a trusted adult
- set out their role in connecting young people to support and opportunities
- establish minimum expectations for safeguarding, confidentiality and training
- increase awareness of trusted adults among young people
- support local areas to monitor access and coverage through a National Wellbeing Measurement programme
- prioritise groups least likely to have access to trusted adults, including young people at risk of relational exclusion
- embed young people's voices and experiences in the design and implementation of the Framework.

Places

Every young person should have access to welcoming places, activities and support in their community, where they can develop their sense of belonging. Belonging is about more than relationships alone. It is also shaped by whether young people feel connected to the places where they live and spend their time.

What the evidence shows us

The Good Childhood Report 2026 found that young people need safe and welcoming spaces, affordable activities, opportunities to contribute, and clear information about the support available locally. Many professionals expressed concern about the loss of youth provision in recent years with *three quarters reporting that there are fewer places for young people to spend time than there has been in previous years.* Community belonging was also strongly linked to wellbeing, with *nearly a quarter (23.1%) of young people with low wellbeing reporting that they did not feel like they belonged in their community, compared with just 3.6% of those without low wellbeing.*

Young people and professionals consistently identified welcoming, safe and accessible spaces as essential to belonging. However, many felt there are too few places designed with young people in mind. *Over 8 in 10 professionals disagreed that there were enough appropriate places for children and young people to spend time locally.* Young people described relying on parks intended solely for use by young children, libraries and shopping centres because of a lack of dedicated youth spaces, but often felt these spaces were not designed for them or fully welcoming.

"Young people need spaces where they can go if they're not feeling great and they want to get out of the house... you can just go, sit down, have a biscuit, and if you want to speak to somebody, speak to somebody." **– Young person**

Young people also highlighted that activities and services are often designed without meaningful youth involvement. They wanted more opportunities to shape these spaces, alongside the decisions that affect their lives, including local planning. Professionals similarly raised concerns about decisions on housing and public infrastructure often being made without considering young people's views or needs.

Many young people also felt unwelcome in public spaces. Both young people and professionals described a perception that teenagers are often viewed as a problem to be managed rather than valued members of the community. Experiences of exclusion and negative stereotyping were seen as undermining young people's sense of belonging and connection to their community. In contrast, opportunities for positive interaction between generations were viewed as important for building understanding and stronger community relationships.

Access was another key theme. Young people told us that even where activities and support existed, they were often difficult to find, too expensive, or required significant travel. They emphasised that opportunities are only useful if young people know about them and can access them easily.

"We have lots of parks and lots of free activities, but they're not very helpful unless young people know about them." **– Young person**

The evidence suggests that belonging is

strongest when spaces, activities, trusted adults and support are brought together. Youth provision and community spaces can provide opportunities to socialise, pursue interests and access support before problems reach crisis point. As a result, they play a critical role in helping young people build lasting connections to their communities and strengthen their sense of belonging.

Turning ambition into action

The Government has already committed to strengthening support for young people through initiatives committed to in the National Youth Strategy, including Young Futures Hubs. This creates an opportunity to ensure young people's experiences of place are more consistently reflected in local planning and service design.

However, access to youth provision and community spaces remains uneven, creating a postcode lottery for many young people. While local authorities already have a statutory duty to provide "sufficient" youth services, there is significant variation in how this is interpreted and delivered. The Government's planned review of this duty presents an opportunity to provide greater clarity about what young people should be able to access, regardless of where they live.

While many local authorities and organisations already involve young people in shaping their communities, there is currently no shared national expectation of what every young person should be able to access locally, and no clear guidance on what makes a community genuinely welcoming and inclusive for young people. There is also an opportunity to set out a clearer long-term vision for how youth provision and wider community services work together as part of a coherent local support system. By adopting a "no wrong door" approach so young people aren't turned away from support with clear referral pathways in place, young people can access help when they need it.

The evidence suggests there is a significant opportunity to support local authorities to create places that foster belonging by bringing together existing good practice. Doing so would help ensure that young people are considered not simply as users of communities, but as active members of them, with meaningful opportunities to shape the places where they live and develop a stronger sense of belonging.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Publish guidance on Teen-Friendly Communities

Local authorities should be supported by the Government to publish guidance on Teen-Friendly Communities to create places with and for young people, where they feel welcome, safe and valued, and set out a clear local entitlement for young people to the spaces, support and opportunities that foster belonging.

The guidance should recognise that belonging is experienced differently by different young people, and that creating belonging requires a diverse range of spaces, relationships, opportunities and support shaped by young people's own experiences and identities.

The guidance should:

- promote access to welcoming, youth-friendly spaces and activities
- ensure the needs of young people are considered in placemaking, planning, and transport decisions
- address barriers faced by different groups of young people, including girls and disabled young people
- promote alternatives to exclusionary approaches that push young people out of public spaces
- support meaningful youth participation and co-design in local decision-making.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Strengthen open-access community hubs

The Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should strengthen open-access community hubs as places that promote belonging and support wellbeing.

These hubs should provide:

- safe and welcoming spaces for young people
- access to trusted adults and positive relationships
- early mental health and wellbeing support
- opportunities to participate
- clear referral pathways to specialist services where needed.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Review the youth services statutory duty

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should undertake its planned review of the statutory duty on local authorities to strengthen youth services and provide a clearer definition of what constitutes "sufficient" youth provision. This should give councils a clearer framework for assessing local need, planning provision, demonstrating how they are working to secure a sufficient youth offer and reporting transparently on the support available to young people in their area. Government should also consider how funding arrangements and wider local partnerships can support local authorities to meet these expectations consistently.

The review should establish expectations for:

- inclusion, accessibility and participation.
- Young people's involvement in shaping services
- how sufficiency is defined, set and measured
- assessing and reporting whether young people can access a sufficient offer of support and opportunities
- measuring the outcome of the statutory duty through implementing a National Wellbeing Measurement.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Deliver long-term funding certainty for youth services

The Government should assess the impact of the new multi-year funding settlement for local authorities on investment in early support, including services for young people. Alongside this, the Government should publish a youth services recovery trajectory, setting out how far new investment will reverse the long-term decline in spending on services for young people and the timescale over which this recovery will be achieved.

Longer-term funding should help services:

- recruit and retain a skilled workforce
- build trusted relationships with young people
- plan and deliver sustainable provision, enabling providers to build long-term resilience and capacity
- provide early support before needs escalate
- create consistent opportunities for belonging and participation.

Power

Every young person should have meaningful influence over the decisions that affect their lives.

When young people are trusted to contribute, influence decisions and see the impact of their involvement, they are more likely to feel connected to their communities and confident that their voices matter.

What the evidence shows us

The Good Childhood Report 2026 found that belonging is strengthened when young people feel heard and can shape the community around them. Young people and professionals consistently emphasised that participation is not simply a way of improving services, but an important part of belonging itself.

Young people consistently told us that having a voice and being listened to helps them feel connected to the places and communities around them. Professionals similarly highlighted the importance of recognising young people as contributors rather than passive recipients of services.

"Somewhere where they [young people] feel heard, like it doesn't really matter where, but as long as they like have a voice there, then they'll feel like they belong." **– Young person**

A strong theme throughout the research was the value of co-design and co-production. Professionals emphasised that young people are often best placed to identify what would

make services more relevant, accessible and appealing.

***"Get them to be part of the change. To inform the services. To designs the facilities. To help the community. They will invest more and take more pride."* – Professional**

The evidence suggests that participation delivers two important benefits. First, it helps create better policies and services by ensuring they reflect young people's experiences. Second, participation itself strengthens belonging by creating opportunities for ownership within communities.

Professionals also stressed the importance of listening directly to young people's experiences rather than making assumptions about what they need.

However, there remains limited national data on young people's experiences of belonging and community connectedness. Without this, it is difficult to understand how experiences vary between places, which groups of young people are most at risk of poor wellbeing, and which approaches are having the greatest impact.

The evidence highlights the need for both meaningful youth participation and a stronger evidence base so that policies, services and communities are shaped by young people's experiences rather than assumptions about them.

Turning ambition into action

The Government has increasingly recognised the importance of youth voice and participation around wellbeing, including through commitments within the National Youth Strategy and the Department for Education's Pupil Engagement Framework. Together, these initiatives provide an opportunity to better understand young people's experiences and ensure their views shape the services and policies that affect them.

However, the participation of young people in service design remains inconsistent. While some organisations embed young people in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services, others rely on one-off consultations with limited influence on decision-making. There is currently no clear expectation that nationally-funded youth provision should involve young people in shaping services.

The Pupil Engagement Framework is primarily designed to support individual schools and does not currently provide a mechanism for understanding wellbeing trends across local areas or nationally. This means that valuable insights cannot easily be used to inform wider policy. In doing so, it is only focusing on a young person's experience in school, failing to acknowledge that young people's wellbeing is shaped by a multitude of factors, including aspects outside of a school's control.

As the Government places a greater emphasis on prevention, there is an opportunity to strengthen expectations around meaningful youth participation while building a broader understanding of young people's wellbeing and belonging, both inside and outside school. This would help ensure that policies and services are shaped by young people's experiences rather than assumptions about their needs.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Make youth participation a core expectation of nationally-funded youth services

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport should ensure proportionate approaches to meaningful youth participation are expected to support nationally-funded youth services and provide funding and practical guidance to support its delivery.

This guidance should cover:

- involving young people in service design and commissioning
- participation in governance and decision-making
- approaches for engaging diverse groups of young people
- youth leadership and peer-led initiatives
- practical examples of co-design and co-production at local level.

RECOMMENDATION 8:

Introduce a National Wellbeing Measurement

The Government should introduce an annual National Wellbeing Measurement, delivered through schools and owned across Government and local partners. Anonymous data should be published at local and national level to inform policymaking and commissioning. The measurement should be used to understand trends and identify need, not to create league tables or assess school performance.

The survey should measure key wellbeing metrics, including:

- belonging
- trusted adult relationships
- participation and youth voice
- community connectedness
- mental health and wellbeing.

Pathways

Every young person should be able to find and access routes into their community.

Earlier evidence in this briefing demonstrates that belonging is strengthened through access to trusted adults, welcoming places, meaningful participation and accessible support. However, these opportunities only improve wellbeing when young people can find, access and navigate them successfully.

What the evidence shows us

The Good Childhood Report 2026 found that access to support and activities is an important part of young people's sense of belonging. Young people consistently told us that knowing there is a place to go with things to do can make a significant difference to their wellbeing, particularly during difficult periods. Young people highlighted the importance of accessing support before problems reach crisis point. As mentioned previously, they described wanting welcoming spaces where they could connect with others and seek help in an informal environment.

Activities, clubs, sports and creative opportunities were seen as important pathways into belonging. Young people described these opportunities as places where they could meet others with shared interests and develop a stronger sense of identity.

"There you can meet people who have the same hobbies as you and that helps you develop your identity because people can

***see who you are. You can see who you are by trying different activities."* – Young person**

However, young people often reported difficulties finding and navigating support. Young people called for clearer information about where they can go for help, identifying youth workers, counsellors, mental health services and community organisations as important sources of support. They told us that it can be hard to know what help is available and how to access it.

***"It's very difficult to know where to go unless you've been told."* – Young person**

Young people and professionals stressed that opportunities and support are only useful if they are accessible and joined up. Many young people felt there were too few opportunities to explore interests and try new experiences, while others highlighted barriers relating to cost, accessibility and inclusion. Schools were often identified as important gateways to support, but young people wanted a wider range of accessible opportunities beyond the classroom.

As referenced above, professionals also emphasised the importance of trusted adults and continuity of support. They highlighted that trust takes time to build, and that young people need confidence that support will remain available when they need it. Key transition points, such as moving between schools or from child to adult services, can disrupt relationships and leave young people navigating complex systems with little continuity. Young people's needs do not disappear while they are waiting for support, and without a sense of belonging they risk becoming increasingly isolated.

The evidence suggests that clear pathways into support and community life act as a protective factor in young people's lives. Young people themselves recognised that when positive opportunities for belonging are absent, some young people may look elsewhere for connection and support.

Turning ambition into action

The Government has increasingly recognised that reducing waiting times alone is not enough to reverse the decline in children's wellbeing and that young people should be able to access support while they wait for specialist services. However, support remains inconsistent across the country, with no shared national framework for what young people can expect while waiting for treatment. Current approaches focus on self-management, communication and risk monitoring.

The Government's wider focus on prevention, including community-based support and neighbourhood health services, presents an opportunity to strengthen the role of social prescribing as part of a more joined-up support system. Recent initiatives, including Young Futures Hubs, the Department for Work and Pensions' Youth Hubs, Neighbourhood Health Centres, Early Support Hubs, Family Hubs and reforms to youth services, provide an opportunity to create clearer pathways into support and ensure services work together rather than in isolation.

The Department for Education's Enrichment Framework is also a welcome step in recognising the role that activities and enrichment play in young people's development and wellbeing. There is now an opportunity to ensure that enrichment opportunities are consistently available, accessible and inclusive, while strengthening the role of schools in connecting young people to opportunities and support within their wider communities.

Together, these developments provide an opportunity to create more coherent local support systems, improve transitions between children's and adult services, and ensure that young people can access the support that helps them to thrive.

RECOMMENDATION 9:

Create a national Waiting Well offer

The Department for Health and Social Care should establish a national Waiting Well offer for children and young people waiting for NHS mental health support. The Department should support Integrated Care Boards to commission the offer consistently, ensuring that no young person faces a postcode lottery while waiting for treatment. The Government should also develop a clear national framework for the offer, including minimum standards and outcomes measures.

This offer should provide:

- social prescribing into community activities, enrichment and volunteering
- access to trusted adults and relationship-based support
- clear information about available support and expected waiting times
- consistent communication, risk monitoring and escalation pathways.

RECOMMENDATION 10:

Support delivery of the Enrichment Framework for Schools and Colleges

The Department for Education should support full implementation of the Enrichment Framework, ensuring that all young people can access high-quality, inclusive enrichment opportunities.

This should recognise the value of a broad mix of opportunities, including informal youth provision, creative and cultural activities, sports, volunteering and uniformed youth organisations, enabling young people to connect with others in ways that reflect their interests and identities.

This should include:

- supporting schools to provide enrichment opportunities that reflect young people's diverse interests and identities
- strengthening links between schools and community organisations
- increasing participation among young people least likely to engage
- sharing effective practice across schools and colleges.

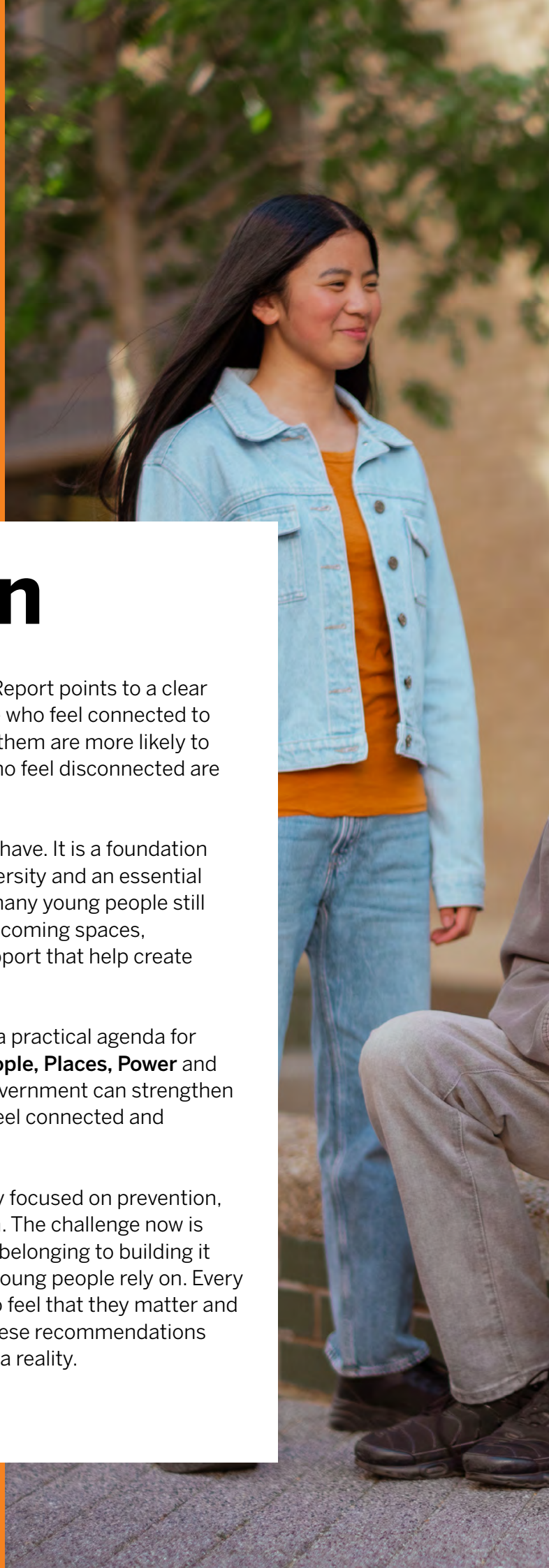
RECOMMENDATION 11:

Build connected local support systems

The Government should publish a long-term plan setting out guidance on how Early Support Hubs, Young Futures Hubs and other new youth initiatives are integrated with existing local services through clear referral pathways and a "no wrong door" approach to support, including consideration of local needs.

This should include:

- clear referral pathways between schools, youth services, health services, community provision and other relevant local services
- a long-term approach to integrating new Government initiatives with existing local services and referral pathways
- improved transition arrangements between children's and adult's services
- additional support for young people at significant transition points.



Conclusion

The evidence in this year's Good Childhood Report points to a clear conclusion: belonging matters. Young people who feel connected to the people, places and communities around them are more likely to experience positive wellbeing, while those who feel disconnected are more likely to struggle.

Belonging should not be viewed as a nice-to-have. It is a foundation for wellbeing, a protective factor against adversity and an essential part of helping young people thrive. Yet too many young people still face barriers to the trusted relationships, welcoming spaces, meaningful opportunities and accessible support that help create a sense of belonging.

The recommendations in this report set out a practical agenda for change through the four Ps of belonging: **People, Places, Power** and **Pathways**. Together, they set out how the Government can strengthen the conditions that enable young people to feel connected and supported.

At a time when policymakers are increasingly focused on prevention, belonging offers a clear framework for action. The challenge now is to move from recognising the importance of belonging to building it intentionally, into the systems and services young people rely on. Every young person should have the opportunity to feel that they matter and that they have a place where they belong. These recommendations provide a roadmap for making that ambition a reality.

Across the country, young people's needs are being ignored.

Trapped in poverty, facing poor mental health and abuse both on and offline, too many only receive help once they reach crisis point. We're working to change that.

The Children's Society is by young people's side when they need us, providing lasting support and campaigning for the changes that will improve young lives.

Together, we can make sure that no young person faces life alone.

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