

# Cheshire East Good Childhood Report

Measuring children's and young people's well-being in  
Cheshire East



Photograph modelled for The Children's Society | © Larry Bray

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## **1. Introduction and summary of key findings**

The Cheshire East Survey of Children and Young People 2014 provides a unique insight into the lives of children and young people aged 7 to 17 living in Cheshire East. Over 1,800 children and young people in primary and secondary schools across the area participated in the survey. Previously in 2013 the work had been conducted in Knutsford with 923 children and young people and most of those results are included in this report. This gives a combined sample size of 2,810.

The survey questionnaire covered all the key aspects of children's lives from their feelings about life as a whole, to their relationships with family and friends, and their perspectives on school and the local area. The survey questions were taken from a larger set of questions on children's well-being that have been developed and validated by The Children's Society and the University of York. This means that it is possible to compare many of the answers given by children in Cheshire East with the national picture for England.

The aim of undertaking the survey is to identify the aspects of life where children in Cheshire East are doing well, and those where they are not doing so well, in order to identify potential local priorities for improving well-being.

Following the survey, a series of face to face consultations were carried out with children and young people in order to amplify, illustrate and illuminate the survey findings. These consultations were undertaken by a team from The Children's Society who have conducted similar activities across the country and are able draw comparisons with other areas where this work has been conducted.

### **Key findings**

This report presents the main findings from the survey. A summary of key points is as follows:

- Well-being and life satisfaction for children and young people is in general as good as or often better than the national average
- The differences are in how children and young people feel about their health and how teenage girls feel about their appearance. In both these situations Cheshire East does less well
- Higher levels of satisfaction with things is more about having enough than having a lot

- As with the national findings, it is the nature and strength of children's relationships with their family, friends, school staff and local adults that has the greatest impact on well being
- Young people want more shops and places to hang out, but not youth centres
- There are variations within Cheshire East, but they are not significant
- Although the survey shows most children experiencing average or above average scores for well-being, for around 10% their responses suggest they have low well-being. This is in line with the national average
- The concerns girls have about their appearance is mostly influenced by the comments and judgements they make on each other and particularly by the observations boys make about girls
- Boys are generally unaware or unaccepting of the way their comments effect girls and their self esteem

## **2. Details about the survey and consultation work**

The survey questionnaire was developed by The Children's Society in partnership with the University of York. It covers all of the aspects of children's lives that are included in The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index:

- Feelings about life overall
- Self (appearance)
- Health
- Family relationships
- Friendships
- Home
- School
- Local area
- Money and possessions
- Time use
- Choice and autonomy
- The future

All these topics have been found to be important aspects of how children view, and feel about, their lives<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Rees G, Goswami H & Bradshaw J (2010) *Developing an Index of Children's Subjective Wellbeing in England*. London: The Children's Society.

The questionnaire also asked children for information about their age, gender, ethnicity, abilities and living situation.

The survey had been carried out in Knutsford with 920 students in 2012 and some of those results have been included in this report.

## Recruitment and administration

All mainstream primary schools, secondary schools/colleges and special schools in Cheshire East were invited to participate in the survey, and 23 elected to take part and involved 1,887 children and young people completing the survey.

In addition, The Children's Society carried out face-to-face consultations with 771 children and young people in primary schools, secondary schools, one special school and with groups of young people who are looked after by the Local Authority (for more details of the consultation, see the next section).

The survey was administered online by The Children's Society. Children and young people were able to access and respond to a secure online questionnaire which varied according to school year to ensure that the content of the questions was age-appropriate.

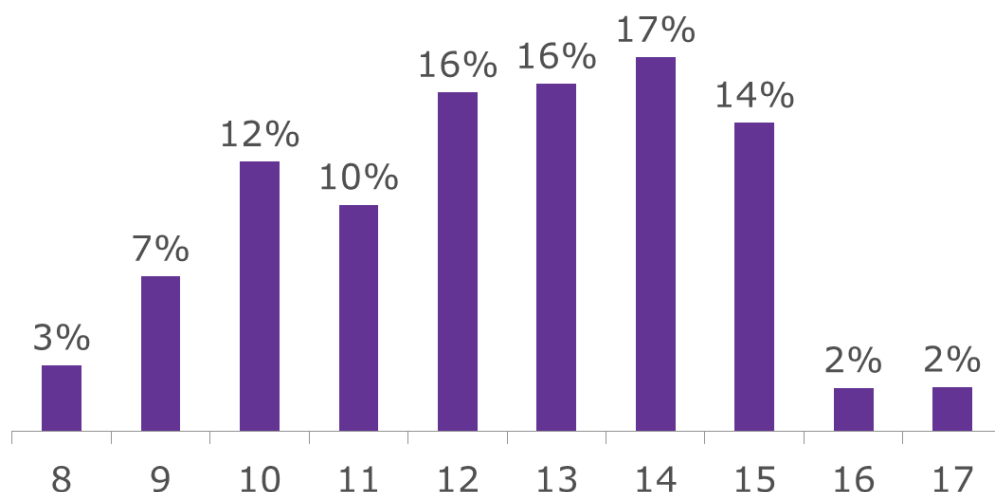
The survey was conducted in accordance with an ethical protocol approved by The Children's Society's research ethics panel, consisting of internal and external experts.

Data cleaning and statistical analysis of the questionnaire has been conducted by staff in The Children's Society's in-house research team.

## Profile of the young people taking part in the survey

The sample was well balanced between females (53%) and males (47%).

The age distribution of participating children and young people are shown in the table below and include the Knutsford survey.



Based upon the low number of children in some age categories in the Cheshire East survey, national comparisons are based on those aged 9-17 only.

8% of participating students said they receive free school meals.

3% of participants said they live in a household where no adult is in paid work, while just under one quarter (22%) live in a household with one adult in paid work.

## **Presentation of findings**

This report presents an overview of findings from the survey as follows. First, we look at children's feelings about their lives as a whole. Then we provide key findings on the different aspects of children's lives covered in the survey.

In each section we make some comparisons within the sample (mainly on the basis of age and gender) and where possible make comparisons with data from nationally representative samples of children and young people in the same age group in England as a whole.

We have used statistical tests to check whether differences between groups within survey (e.g. females and males) are statistically significant. Where we have said that a difference is statistically significant this means that there is less than a 1% likelihood of the difference happening purely by chance. This is a standard threshold used by researchers for surveys of this type.

## **About the consultation**

Following the completion of the survey by over 1,800 children, The Children's Society consulted with 771 children and young people face-to-face on the key issues that emerged from initial analysis of the survey. The aim was to explore and illustrate with children's own words some of the key issues raised by the survey, and specifically the following topics:

- School and relationships with peers and staff in particular
- Thoughts about the future
- Health and appearance
- Local area, and thoughts about improvements
- Possessions and things children and young people own

The Children's Society arranged consultations with primary schools, secondary schools, youth councils and with the children in care group. The school consultations involved classes in year groups 3 to 10. We used a variety of class

activities that allowed children and young people to reflect on the survey findings, consider their own responses and discuss them with their peers. We recorded some of their comments and they provided some written comments through some of the activities.

In this report, we present these written and verbal comments from children and young people from the consultation alongside the main themes of the survey to which they relate.

Our intention is to provide an insight into the types of issues that children and young people raised when we asked them about the key themes emerging from the survey. The comments included here are therefore illustrative rather than representative, and they offer a summary rather than a full discussion of the consultation exercise.

Although we have a record of where the comments were made, we do not identify children to protect their anonymity.

### **3. Life as a whole**

The questionnaire asked children how they felt about their lives as a whole. International research with adult populations indicates that there are different components of 'well-being':

- Levels of happiness, which can vary from day to day or hour to hour
- Cognitive assessments of satisfaction or happiness with life as a whole, which are more stable
- Feelings of personal development or 'flourishing'.

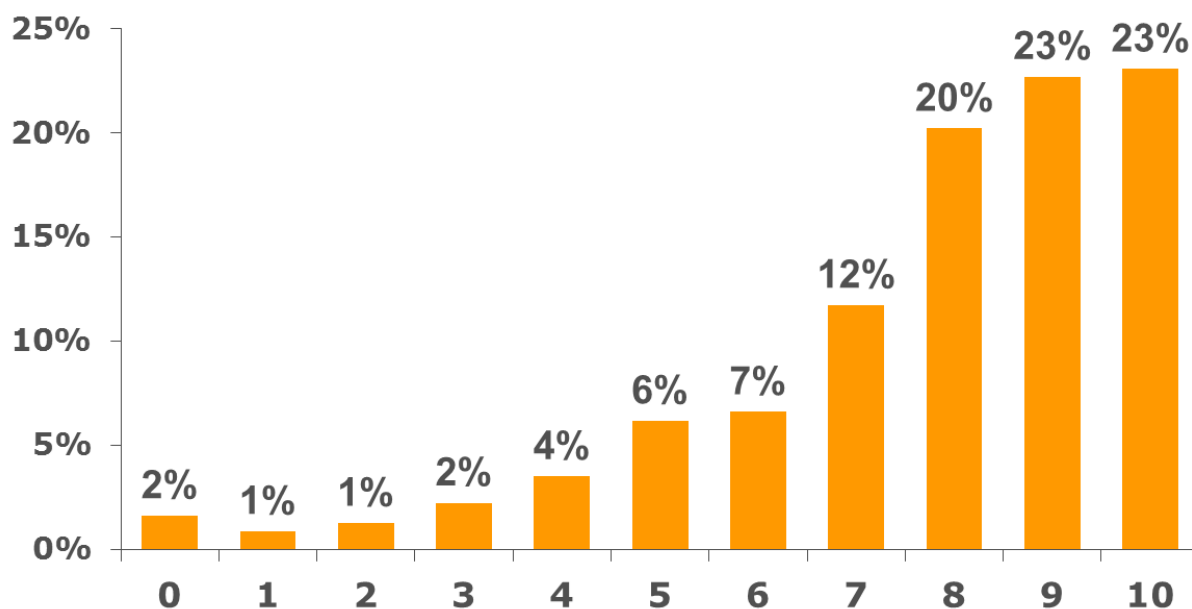
We asked children a question about the second bullet point: how happy they are with their life as a whole. For this question children could respond on a scale from zero to 10 where zero = 'very unhappy' and 10 = 'very happy'.

In response to the questions about how happy children are with their lives and almost a quarter answered very happy with a score of 10 out of 10 and less than 3% answered with very unhappy with a score of zero.

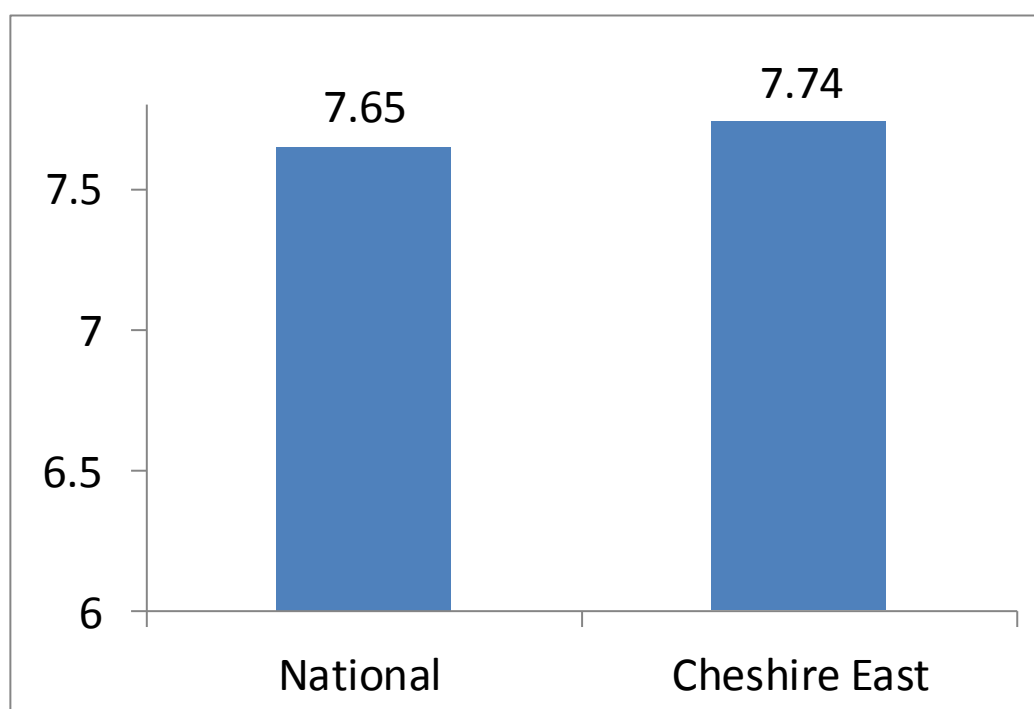
As with the national average most children answered that they were happy with their lives as a whole and this response is generally higher for primary age children than for secondary age. In this respect children and young people in Cheshire East are similar to the national average and if anything indicate slightly higher scores than the national average.

*"It is quite easy to be happy because there are nice people and nice friends around and in school"- year 7 girl*

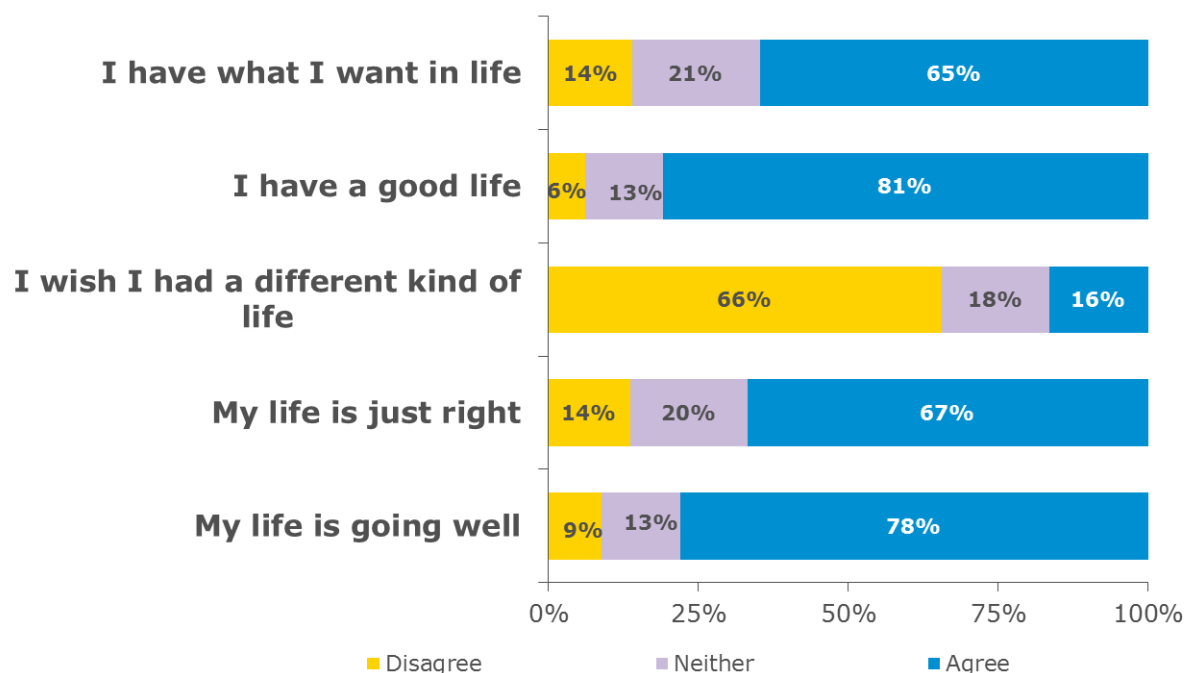
## How happy are you with your life as a whole?



The overall score out of 10 for well-being was a little higher than the national average at 7.74



This single-item question about life as a whole is useful for getting a basic picture of how children feel about their lives overall, but we also included another set of questions about children's life satisfaction, which can be used to create a score of children's well-being that is more statistically robust and can be used to compare well-being between different groups of children. These questions are in the form of statements that children are asked how much they agree or disagree with. The statements, and children's responses to them, are shown in the Figure 4 below. This shows that most children agree or strongly agree with all the statements (except for the third statement, which is phrased negatively). Between 6% and 16% respond negatively depending on the question asked.



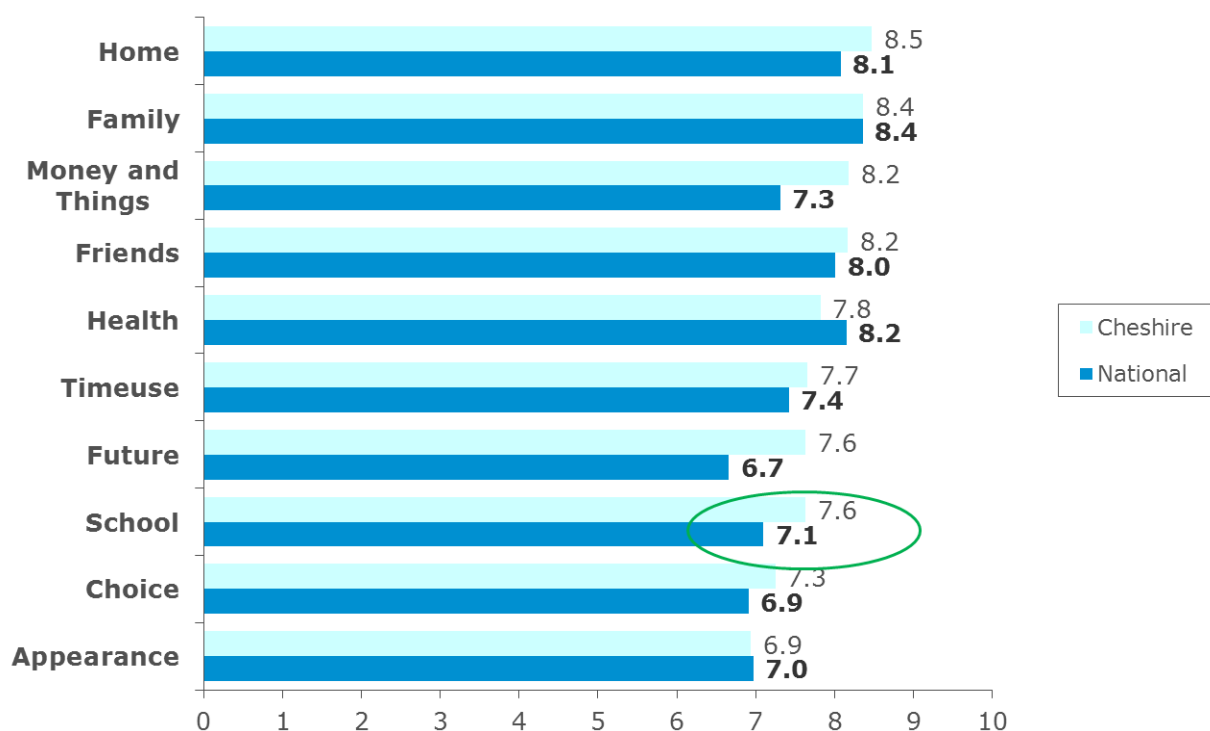
Research shows that answers to these kinds of questions do not reflect a temporary state. For example, our research suggests that around half of children who have low life satisfaction now will still do so in six months' time. International research also suggests that low well-being is linked with a range of other longer-term problems and issues in children's lives. It is therefore important to understand the factors that cause low well-being in order to consider what measures might be taken to provide support to children who are in this situation.

*"If I lost my tablet I wouldn't be that bothered but if I lost my cat I would be so sad"* - year 5 girl

Surprisingly, the research on well-being indicates that factors that might be expected to explain variations in children's (and adults') well-being such as gender, ethnicity, family structure and economic status are not as important as might be anticipated. There are variations in well-being according to these factors (for example, children in poorer families do tend to have lower well-being than children in richer families). However, these types of factors can only explain a small part of the variations in well-being. Amongst children in England our research suggests that all of these types of factors put together explain less than 10% of the variation in life satisfaction.

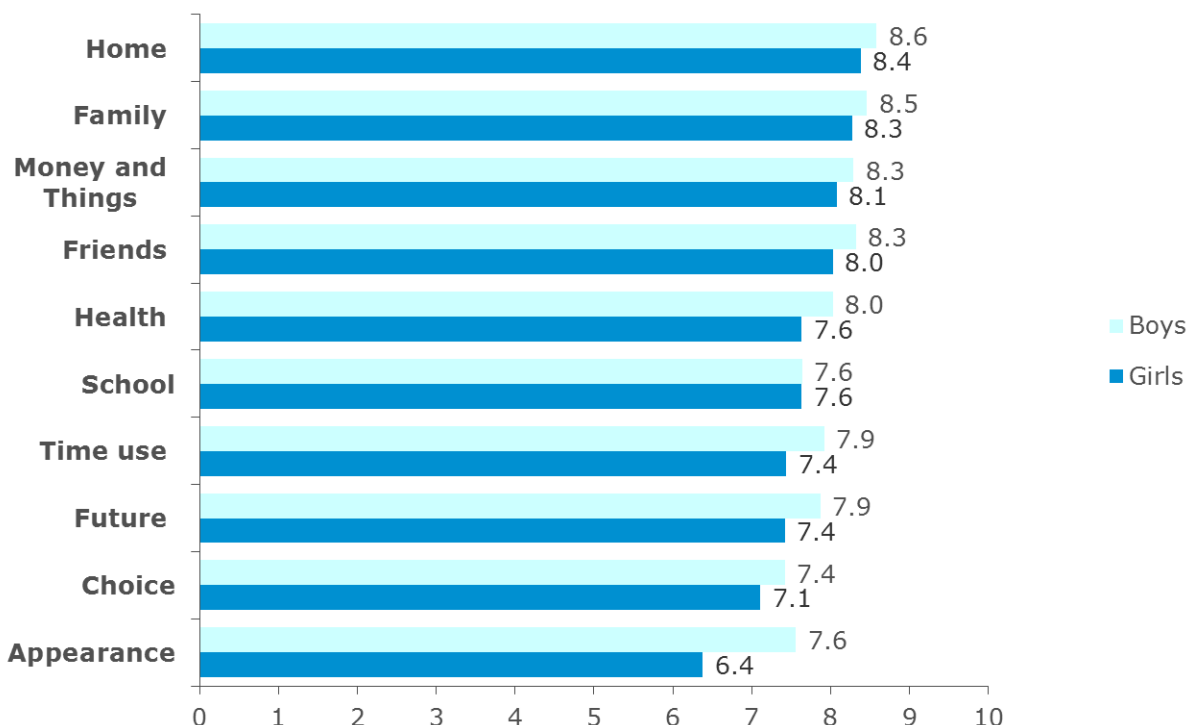
## 4. Feelings about different aspects of life

In the survey we used questions from our Good Childhood Index which ask children how happy they feel with different aspects of their lives. Children were asked to rate each aspect from zero to 10 where zero = 'very unhappy', five = 'neither happy or unhappy' and 10 = 'very happy'. The mean scores for children's responses to these questions in comparison to the national average are shown below.



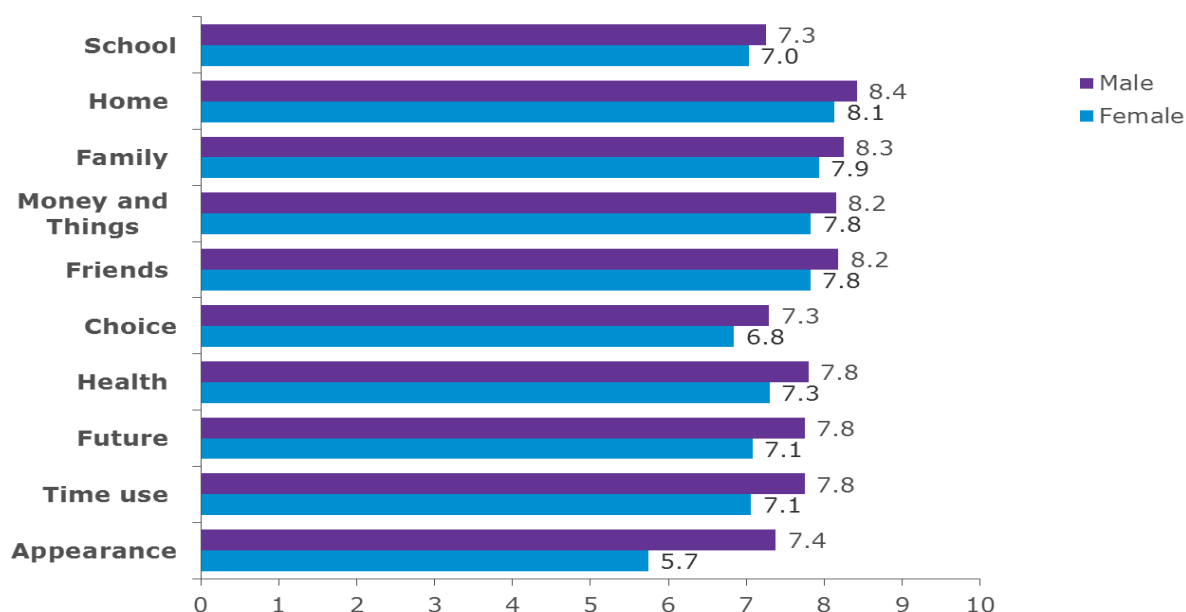
The results for Cheshire East show that in most domains children and young people are scoring higher than the national average, for example the response for how happy children are with school is 7.6 compared to 7.1 nationally.

Where children and young people score below the national average is in how they feel about their health and to a lesser extent their appearance. This is for the whole sample of children and young people. When age and gender is taken into account the results are more pronounced.



Boys are scoring higher than girls in all domains apart from school where they are equal. How girls feel about their appearance is significantly different for girls.

But when age is taken into account it is apparent that the difference increases as children grow older. The figure below is for **secondary age** only.



## 5. Appearance

In the consultations with children and young people there were indications from the primary age girls that they were already thinking about their appearance and looks.

*"It's pants being a girl because you have got to mess around looking nice and doing make up, plus hair" - year 6 girl*

Girls in year 5 and 6 were not necessarily unhappy about their looks but in activities where they were given the opportunity to reflect on themselves they were more likely to focus on appearance.

*"I love being a girl because they have more fashion sense, you can wear make up, you can wear high heels" - Year 6 girl*

But for most of the consultations with girls in secondary schools their reflections were more negative and were largely concerned with how boys and girls comment on physical appearance. Their sense was that most comments were critical and that the boys in particular were insensitive to the impact that had on them.

*"There is a lot of pressure to look good, you get called names no matter what, people always say stuff behind your back, boys always call you ugly if you have spots, or a slag if you wear makeup" - year 8 girl*

*"Boys judge you and they expect perfection from you. It only started in High school because in primary they didn't really care" - year 7 girl*

*"Because boys only want a real life Barbie" - year 9 girl*

*"Girls can't go out the house without make up looking good. Boys are mainly the ones that criticise girls for their looks, boobs or bums. Then girls feel insecure and threatened" - year 8 girl*

There was little evidence in the consultations that boys were either aware of the impact they were having or particularly cared about that impact.

*"Boys don't mind as much about how they look, but girls always want to look good" - year 8 boy*

*"They might be ugly, they look bad with lots of make up on" - year 9 boy*

*"Most of them are minters anyway, so why shouldn't they know?" - year 9 boy*

The consultations with young people suggested that for some girls the concerns they had about their appearance and how critical they were of each other was making them feel anxious and unhappy. Some girls were able to brush off the concerns but it is clear that this is a major issue for teenage girls and that it is most influenced by the way they make observations of each other.

## 5. Health

Health was the other area where both boys and girls scored below the national average although again the scores for girls were lower than for boys. In the consultations boys and girls were asked to reflect on different aspects of health and consider what effected whether they felt healthy or not. In many cases children struggled to identify what they thought constituted good or poor health. But their main reflections were around diet, exercise and emotional well-being.

*"It's not hard to choose between a burger and broccoli – you would choose a burger" - boy year 8*

*"There are lots of activities I like football at the park" - boy year 8*

*"There are quite a few fast food places in Poynton. There is a pub so people will smoke and drink" - year 8 girl*

*"There are not enough healthy inspired café's" - year 8*

*"In my village there are a lot of ways to stay healthy because there are lots of jogging places and walking areas. It is also affordable to be active" - year 7 girl*

*"Mostly it's very expensive to buy fruit and healthy food. In Bollington there are mainly takeaways" - year 8*

*"It depends how people around me feel because that massively effects how I feel" - year 8 girl*

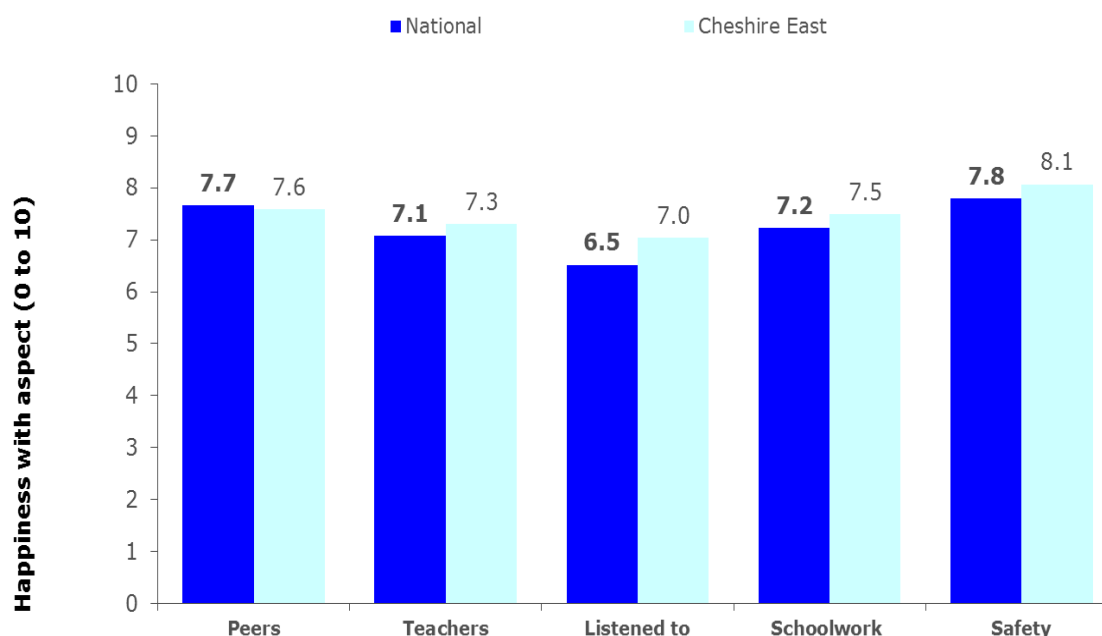
It is hard to generalise the views of young people regarding health because there were differences in attitudes according to the options young people had. In some areas young people talked about the opportunities to be involved in sport and outdoor activity that were free or simply accessible. In other areas young people felt they had limited options or what was available was too expensive to use.

Equally in terms of diet and health many young people referred to the ready availability of fast food but there was a greater variance in terms of how accessible and affordable healthy food was to them. For some boys there was an understanding that fast food wasn't particularly healthy but that they enjoyed it anyway. Knowing what healthy food is but not eating it may contribute to how healthy young people feel.

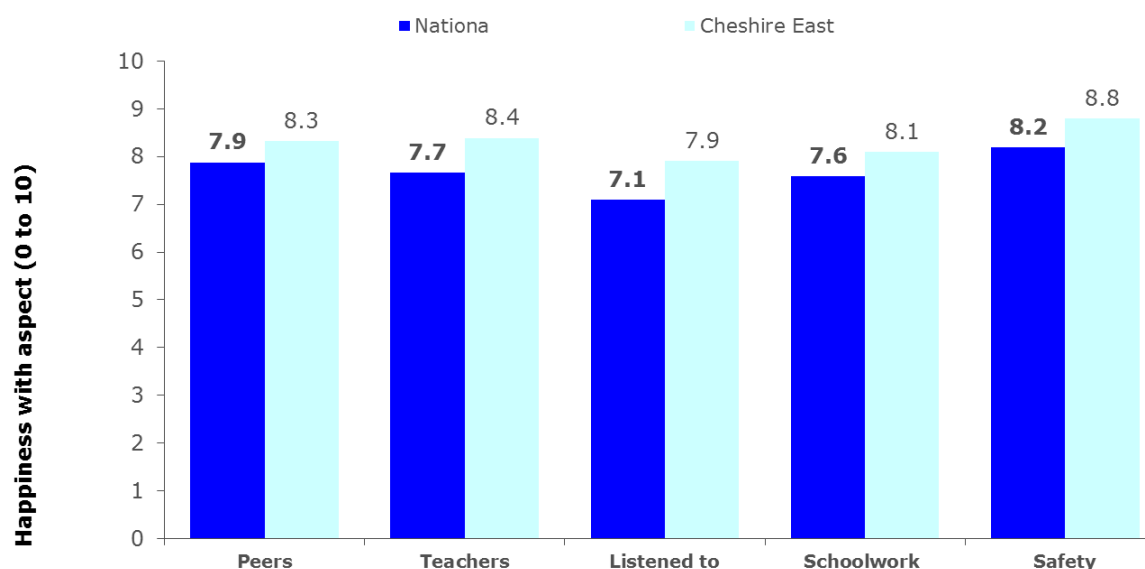
Being happy was a feature of good health particularly for the girls and being happy was associated mostly with good relationships, with friends as well as family. The connection with concerns about appearance and feeling happy and healthy was made by a number of the girls who recognised that many of the comments they received were about their physical appearance and body shape.

## 6. School

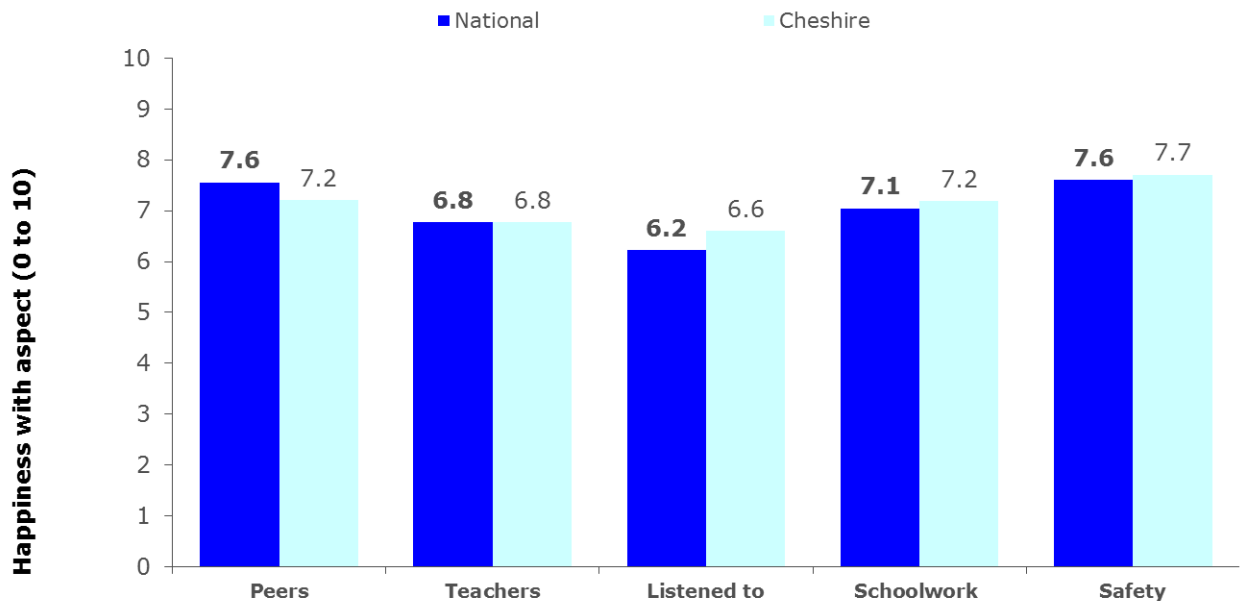
The overall results for how children and young people feel about their school experience suggests that children in the area have similar levels of happiness as the national average. In most domains their happiness with school is a little higher than the national average with the exception of how they happy they are with their peers. For all ages the results are:



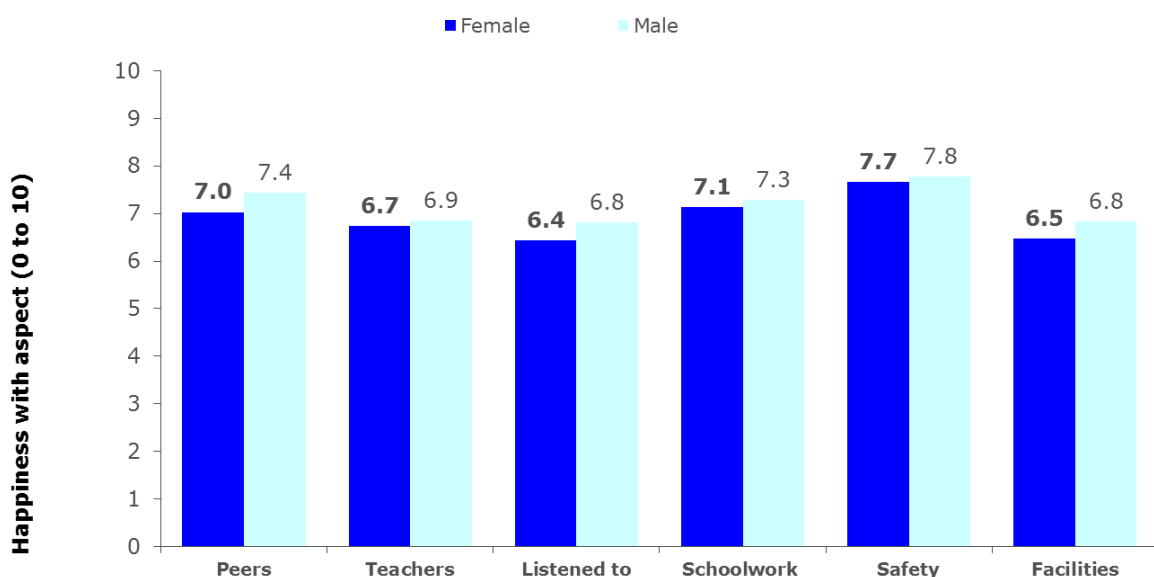
But for children in primary school the children in Cheshire East indicate higher levels of happiness than the national average in all domains.



We know from our national data that children become less happy with their school experience as they move from primary to secondary school and that is no different in Cheshire East. Overall at secondary school age young people are still as happy as the national average or a little higher with the exception of levels of happiness with their peers where it is a little less.



This difference is not particularly significant except that it is girls whose experience lowers the score at secondary age.



In the consultations with children and young people we explored how young people felt about the different aspects of school life and as with the survey findings it was the girls who had the lesser experiences.

*"I feel sad at school all the time. It is hard to fit in at school because other people make you feel bad/poo about yourself (especially the popular's) There should not be people which think they are better than you. I don't have many friends"- girl year 9*

*"Many girls and boys have started to think it's acceptable to call each other nasty names, but it's horrible" - girl year 8*

*"It's different from primary school; I find it really hard to keep on top of all the homework" - girl year 7*

Typically a lot of the comments about school related to work, homework and individual teachers. But for the girls there was a continuing thread of comments that connected with issues of appearance and how boys and girls comment on each other. There was little evidence to suggest this was happening on line specifically but was reflected time and again by girls about people talking about them directly or indirectly in ways that made them feel uncomfortable and unhappy.

## **7. Possessions and things children own**

The survey suggested that children and young people in Cheshire East were happier than the national average in relation to the things and possessions that they own. This was true for both boys and girls and they had broadly equal levels of satisfaction. When exploring this issue in other areas we have found that this result does not necessarily reflect a high level of material possession but rather a level of satisfaction with what is personally owned.

In consultations with children and young people in Cheshire East on this theme we formed the following key conclusions:

- Primary age children value their pets as much as any toy or game
- Sports equipment such as a bike or football was regarded by many as a priority item to own
- Few children and young people put much value on having a television
- A smart phone gives young people access to music, games, the internet and a means of keeping in touch with friends and family. As such it is often all young people need

- Boys up to the age of 14 are likely to prioritise games consoles above many other items
- Few children and young people thought that it was important to have a lot of pocket money or designer clothes

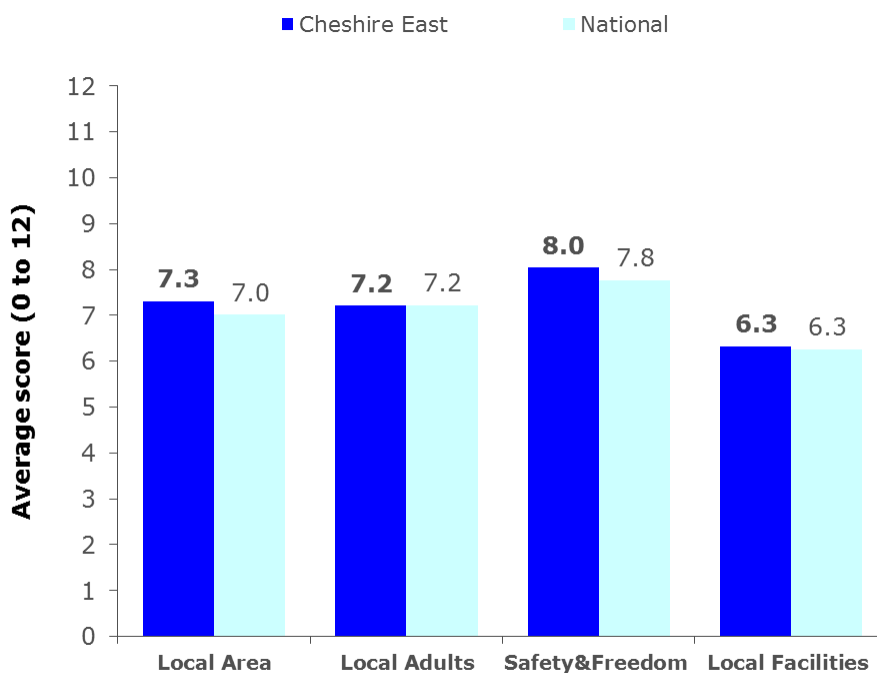
*"My cat is epic" - year 5*

As with the findings of our national well-being work what we find is that what matters most to children and young people is that they have a similar amount of things to their peers. In part this is why a smart phone seems to be all that is needed as most have one even if the contract or value of the phone itself may differ.

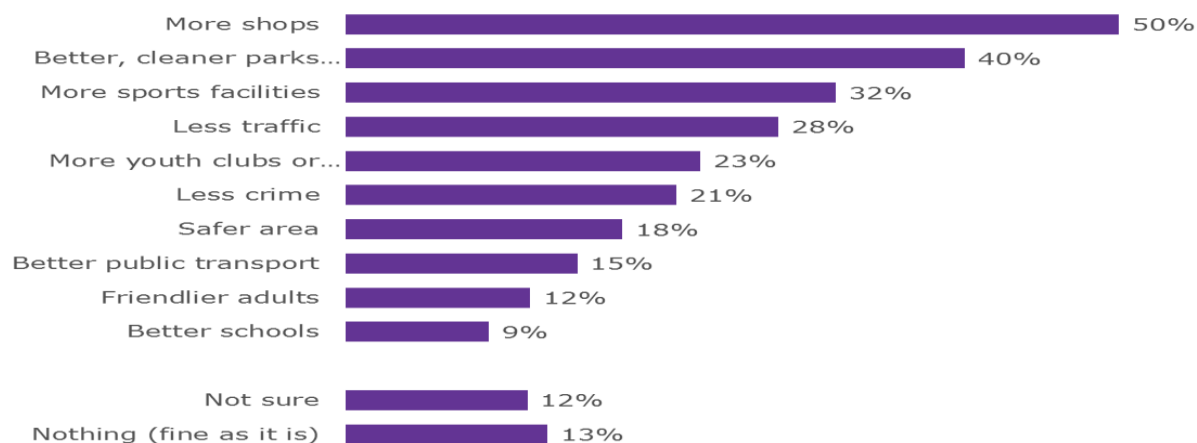
## 8. The local area

It is an important element of the survey that children and young people's views about their local area are sought. How they experience the neighbourhood they live in and go to school in makes a difference to their overall well-being. The survey asked children and young people to reflect on how happy they were with local facilities, their safety and freedom in their neighbourhood and local adults.

The results for Cheshire East are in line with the national average.



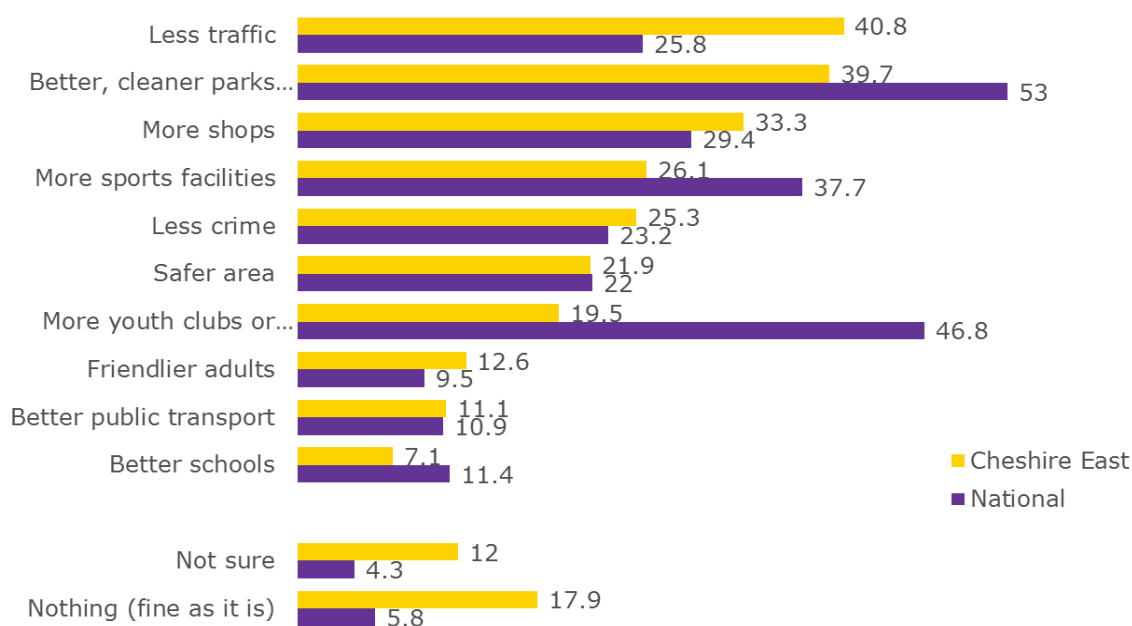
In the consultations with children and young people it was recognised that the neighbourhoods they lived in varied considerably. Some live in rural communities and villages and others in urban towns with equally varying features. Consequently the focus of the consultations was on what children and young people said they thought would most improve the area they live in. The results for Cheshire East for all ages are in the figure below.



By far the biggest single improvement children and young people were looking for is more shops. The proportion of children and young people who said there was nothing wrong with their area was higher than the national average and in consultations with children and young people there were many who were quite satisfied. But the key differences between Cheshire East and the national average are more clearly seen in the results broken down by age.

Primary school age children did put a higher priority on more shops than the national average and on wanting friendlier adults. But it is their concern about traffic that stands out and their lack of wanting more youth clubs.

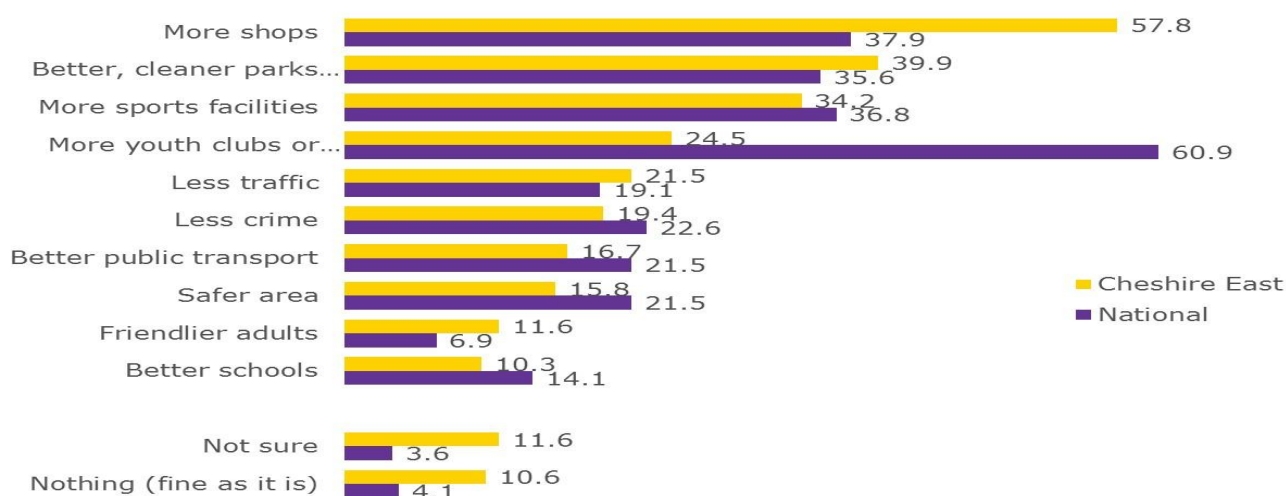
*"Our streets nice, there's a big field at the bottom where kids play"- year 5*



In exploring the theme of traffic children of this age group reflected on the speed of traffic as much as the volume of traffic and this seemed to relate more to children in rural areas.

In most cases children in this age group expressed limited knowledge and understanding about what a youth club was and few had any experience of one. That might go some way to explaining why they did not put a greater emphasis on seeing more provided. Crime and safety are in line with the national average for this age group and other than some fears and perceptions of crime few children could specify any experiences.

For secondary age young people there were one or two stand out responses.



More shops is the biggest priority for young people and conversely more youth clubs is the least of their priorities in comparison to the national average. Again as with the primary age children this may reflect the general lack of understanding and experience of youth clubs.

*"what's a youth club?"- year 7 boy*

*"I don't actually know what a youth centre is" - year 9 boy*

But those who did know about youth clubs and youth centres had a fairly negative view of them.

*"Sometimes like there is too many they (young people) hang around outside and I feel a bit intimidated" - year 7 boy*

*"It just reminds you of old people's homes"- year 8*

*"It's boring, there isn't much to do there and they don't open up the hall so we can play football, and it's £2.50" - year 9 boy*

*"There are too many adults" - year 7*

The last comment reflects what many young people thought about organised youth provision, in that it is supervised by adults. Whereas shops, and coffee shops in particular, have the appeal of being an adult space that is legitimate for young people to spend time in.

*"Costa is somewhere to go" - year 7*

*"There's nothing to do where I live, I live in the middle of nowhere in between Sandbach and Middlewich" - year 7 boy*

As with our experience in other parts of the country young people talked about shops as places to go rather than a place to spend money. That said, many of the girls would prefer to have access to New Look or Primark.

There was a varied response to the issue of public transport but few young people made it a priority as many seemed to have access to affordable transport to go to places of interest to them.

*"I can get the train to Manchester for £2.10" - year 8*

For some young people however they had comments about their area that reflect their unhappiness with where they live even if most are happy.

*"The place I live has a lot of litter/mess, takeaways, rundown buildings, graffiti, and pubs. I don't feel safe in my area because there are a lot of intimidating people who hang around" - year 7*

*"There are a lot of people who smoke near where I live – they are not nice people. There is a lot of dog poo. I feel ashamed to live where I live"- year 8*

Cheshire East is a varied area with rural, suburban and urban neighbourhoods and in close proximity to major conurbations. There is affluence and poverty and some communities are well served while others offer limited provision for young people. Consultations with young people in Crewe did produce more evidence that young people would like more youth provision and in some of the rural locations the lack of public transport was an issue.

*"Well, we've got the swimming baths, Maccies (MacDonalds), we got a bike track, a Subway, a big Morrisons, a big ASDA, Aldi, we've got Doctors and dentists, we've got an indoor shopping area and Specsavers"-year 9 boy, Winsford*

*"I live so far away from my friends so I can't really like see them" - year 7 girl*

*"I've got my horse" - year 7 girl*

*"It's not safe people come speeding around in cars and it's a rough area there are scary places on the estate" - year 7 boy*

Even with this diversity it was apparent both in the survey and in the consultations that young people are looking for opportunities to meet informally with friends and that youth friendly shops and cafés are preferred. The lack of emphasis on designated youth services may be influenced by a lack of knowledge but there is no doubt that it does not register as a priority for most young people.

## **9. Conclusions**

With the previous survey in Knutsford more than 2,800 children and young people in Cheshire East have given their perspective on well-being and happiness. The qualitative consultations with nearly 800 children and young people has amplified and explained the results of the survey to produce a comprehensive and unique insight into the well-being of children and young people living in the area.

Overall the picture is good. Compared to the national average most children in Cheshire East have a level of well-being that is equal and often higher than the national average. Equally the numbers of children who have low well-being is also in line with the national average and their needs and circumstances should not be lost in the focus on the majority. Our national research indicates that children with low well-being are most likely to be children who do not live with their family, have repeat experience of being bullied or have difficulties with learning.

Within Cheshire East the experience of children at primary school suggests they are happier than the national average but this higher than average experience is not sustained at the same level when they move to secondary school. But the key issue is the way in which girls become less happy than boys and less happy than the national average as they move into adolescence. How they feel about their appearance and the worry they express about their looks has an impact on their overall well-being. Nor is that worry and concern driven by the media or images of skinny models. It is the way in which boys and girls relate to each other and make observations and criticisms of each other, specifically it is the way boys talk to girls about their physical appearance.

Social media may provide another medium for this to happen, but it is not the source of the issue. There are issues of respect, understanding, self-worth, realism and confidence that need to be explored with young people and for that to happen with younger children as well as young people. Of course this already happens in many ways but the evidence from this survey and consultation is that it is not having the desired impact and more needs to be done.

It is an area that would benefit from further consultation and exploration with young people and relates to how young people experience school as much as any other aspect of their lives.

## About us

The most disadvantaged children rarely suffer on just one front. We work directly with these children, many of whom have nowhere else to turn, to ensure that they are loved, valued and listened to. With them we fight childhood poverty, harm and neglect.

Our network of programmes includes drop-in services for runaways, as well as children's centres and support for young carers. We support children who are refugees from violence, and we give those in care a voice. We transform the lives of many more children by pressurising government and local authorities to change policy and practice to protect them, and we challenge the negative attitudes that perpetuate harm and injustice.

In hard times, children are among the hardest hit.

We don't just help them survive - we support them to flourish.