

The University of Manchester



University of Dundee

P-S WELLS Phase 3 School Report

January 2026

A detailed follow-up of our July 2025 Headline Findings report

Worcestershire

Introduction

This report

As a reminder, as part of [#P-S WELLS](#) design and validation, pupils from your Local Authority were invited to complete the survey in June and July 2024 (when they were in Year 6), and again in September and December 2024 when they entered Year 7. 2,025 pupils were involved in this phase of the research altogether.

[#P-S WELLS](#) asked pupils questions about their thoughts and feelings towards the four domains of primary-secondary school transitions experiences (academic, social, personal, and environmental), alongside additional items from already-established and age-appropriate wellbeing measures.

The highlights report that you received back in July 2025 detailed the key findings from the 2023/24 (Year 6) and 2024/25 (Year 7) academic years. Selected items from each domain of the measure were chosen to present the most useful insights into your pupils' responses.

For the current report, we have analysed the data at a deeper level, to examine how the following outcomes changed over time:

- Transitions appraisals - assessed using the four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#):
 - Academic –covering topics such as academic performance, academic work (including homework) and academic expectations of others
 - Social - covering topics such as forming new and losing old relationships with friends and teachers
 - Personal - covering topics such as adapting to changes in identity, autonomy and competence
 - Environmental - covering topics relating to physical changes in the school environment (e.g. size and structure of the secondary school building), and informal environmental changes (e.g. the ethos and culture of secondary school)
- Mental health symptoms - assessed using the “moods and emotions” subscale of the [KIDSCREEN-52](#)
- School connectedness and belonging, measured with the [The School Connectedness Scale](#)

We have presented this data visually using line-graphs, with a brief description providing a summary of the data on the following page, and some recommendations to support future practice. We then present the findings for your Local Authority, so that you can compare these. We hope that this report provides a good insight, to help you with your transitions provision going forward.

Executive Summary

Why is this important?

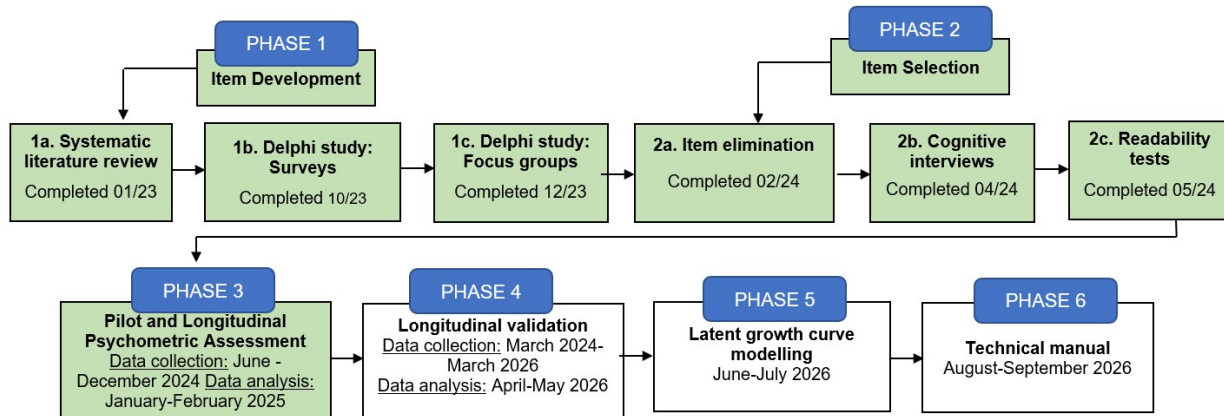
- The number of children experiencing poor emotional wellbeing which can lead to clinically significant mental health conditions in the long term, is increasing rapidly, as are government initiatives outlining the ‘frontline role’ of the school in supporting children’s emotional wellbeing ([DfE, 2023](#)).
- Primary-secondary school transitions are a critical period for children, that poses heightened risk for the development of poor emotional wellbeing and mental health ([Beatson et al., 2023](#), [Bagnall et al., 2024a](#)).
- There is need to take a preventative early-intervention approach during this time by examining longitudinal change in emotional wellbeing, through termly monitoring, to understand:
 - *Which* aspects of primary-secondary school transitions children are experiencing emotional difficulties with and *when*
 - *Who* might be particularly vulnerable during primary-secondary school transitions and *when*
 - *What* universal and targeted support could be useful and *when*
- Identifying the trajectory of variability in emotional wellbeing could then inform early identification of children who may later develop symptoms of poor mental health and/or need additional targeted support ([Bagnall et al., 2024b](#)).

Aims of our research

- To overcome this research gap, we have co-developed and implemented a novel instrument, which is called the Primary-Secondary School Transitions Emotional Wellbeing Scale ([#P-S WELLS](#)), to assess children’s emotional wellbeing in the context of the social, academic, personal and environmental aspects of primary-secondary school transitions, sensitively and robustly.
- [#P-S WELLS](#) is qualitatively different and novel in its approach (i.e., asking children about their feelings towards the changes they are negotiating in context), and in its design and operationalisation (e.g. through careful phrasing of items and longitudinal psychometric assessment and validation)

Overview of the *#P-S WELLS* project and research completed so far

- Between the 2023/24 to the 2025/26 academic years, the *#P-S WELLS* survey has been implemented in over 176 schools, capturing the views of 8948 children across 23 Local Authorities in England and Scotland.
- We have worked in partnership with non-academic stakeholders throughout the project (Bagnall et al., 2024b). All our work has been guided by two advisory groups: one panel of young people (aged 9-13 years) and a second panel of educational and clinical practitioners, NGOs and policymakers. The panels ensure that our research and the insights we co-produce are meaningful and relevant to our intended beneficiaries. For example, prior to designing *#P-S WELLS* we conducted focus groups with Year 6 and 7 children and teachers to obtain their views on what should be included within our measure; and prior to piloting *#P-S WELLS* we conducted one-on-one consultations with Year 6s and 7s, to finetune the wording and content of our questions.
- After analysing the data from the 2023/24 and 2024/25 academic years (pupils who completed our *#P-S WELLS* survey twice in Year 6 [P7 in Scotland] (June and July 2024), and twice in Year 7 [S1 in Scotland], in September and December 2024)), we were able to examine how well the questions worked for future iterations of the measure - we couldn't have done this without your help!



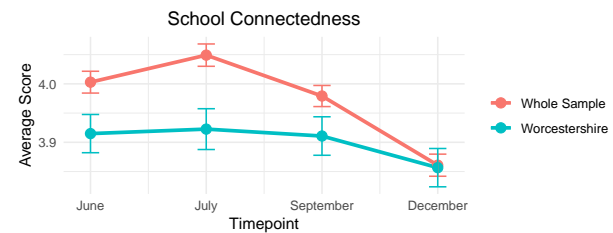
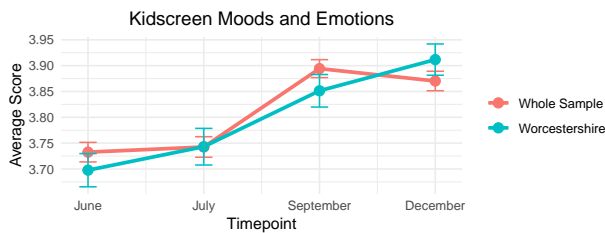
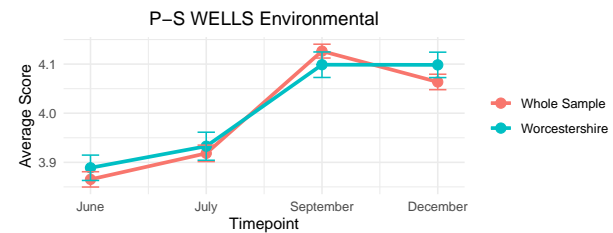
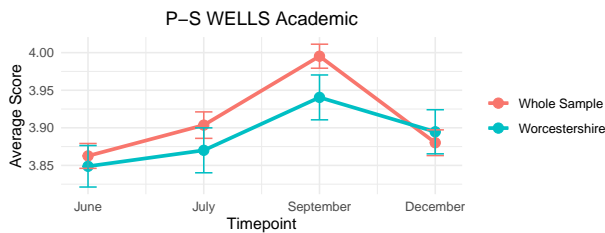
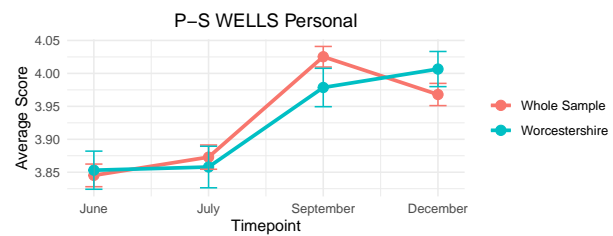
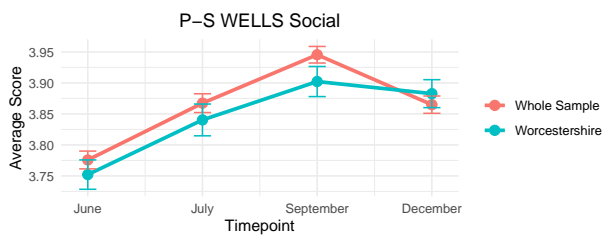
Flow diagram showing the stages of the *#P-S WELLS* project.

Changes over time - comparing your Local Authority with the whole sample

The below figures show how your Local Authority compared to the whole sample.

The figures below show how pupils' responses to items within the four domains of primary-secondary school transitions within [#P-S WELLS](#) changed over time. **Higher scores are indicative of a MORE positive wellbeing response to the domains.**

Below these are the findings of the “moods and emotions” subscale of the KIDSCREEN-52, which looks at mental health symptoms, and a measure of school connectedness (**higher scores are indicative of a MORE positive wellbeing response for both**)



As **Page 4** shows, scores across all four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#) scores are shown to steadily increase over the last two months of primary school, then dramatically increase in the first month of secondary school, and then decrease three months later, across the [#P-S WELLS](#) sample. This can be explained in line with the temporary ‘honeymoon transition period’ pupils may experience during initial primary-secondary school transitions, where transitions anxieties are shown to be temporarily reduced during the first term of secondary school as pupils perceive their new secondary school environment through rose-coloured glasses, and then increase again in the following term ([Hargreaves, 1984](#)).

To support pupils during this time, it is important that primary schools develop pupils’ awareness, knowledge and ability to cope with the multiple changes experienced over primary-secondary school transitions, by practicing skills, asking questions and discussing their feelings in a safe space. This can help pupils feel prepared, but not overwhelmed by their next chapter, which has been shown within qualitative research to be a fine balancing act ([Bagnall et al., 2020](#)). Secondary schools can help children over the first two terms of secondary school by taking a gradual and progressive approach that nurtures pupils’ confidence, fosters a sense of belonging, and allows time for socio-emotional and academic adjustment. Providing consistent pastoral support, clear communication, and opportunities for peer connection can ease anxieties and promote resilience, helping to establish positive attitudes toward their new school environment ([Bagnall et al., 2024](#)). This is especially important considering the increase in mental health symptoms, and decline in school connectedness, that is shown on the bottom two figures of **Page 4** across the [#P-S WELLS](#) sample.

To this end, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Making stress more manageable by creating...
 - Gradual change over time, and avoiding too many changes at the same time
 - Opportunities for discussions in a safe environment about excitement and concerns related to starting secondary school. This could be done by creating hypothetical discussions using fictional character/s, and/or practicing relevant skills
2. Developing self-compassion by...
 - Teaching of self-compassion in the curriculum/classroom discussions; using compassionate pedagogy
 - Teachers and other adults role-modelling self-compassion
 - Developing growth mindset through everyday classroom practices
3. Developing positive peer relationships and networks by...
 - Developing active and empathetic listening
 - Using pedagogical approaches through, for instance, problem based learning and small group-based learning activities/assessment
 - Prioritising relationship-building over academic aspects, especially at the start of secondary school

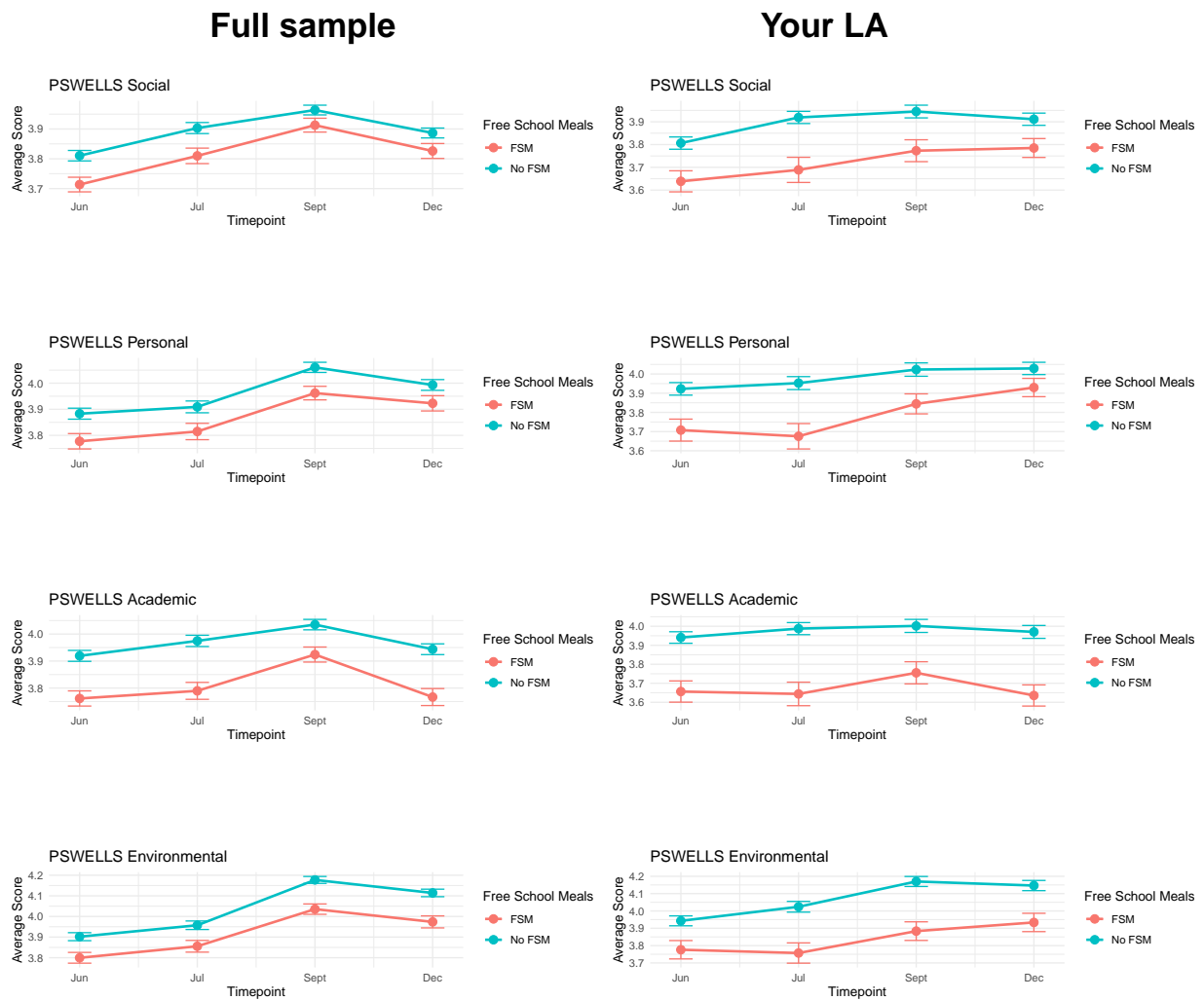
4. Developing trusting relationships with teachers, including...

- Early familiarisation with secondary school teachers by visiting secondary school on multiple occasions and secondary school teachers visiting primary schools
- Having open and respectful discussions with pupils (could be about a range of matters important to each pupil)
- Creating opportunities for positive interaction (rather than when there is a problem)

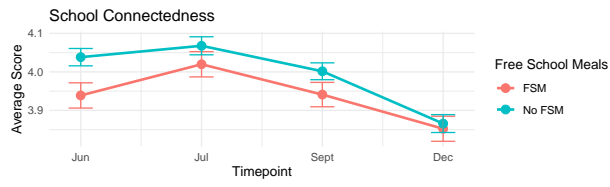
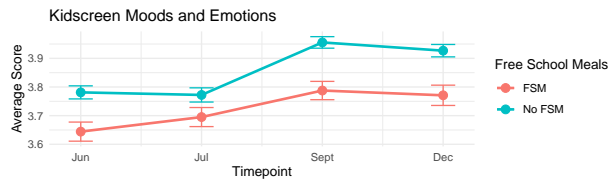
Changes over time - comparing your Local Authority with the whole sample - FREE SCHOOL MEALS

The below figures show the whole sample (first column) compared to your Local Authority (second column) **broken down by Free School Meal status**, for each of the measures.

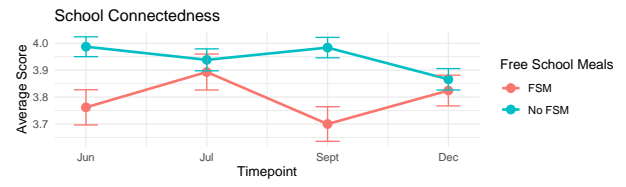
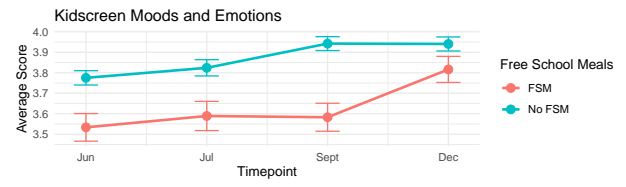
The current page shows the four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#), and the next page the “moods and emotions” subscale of the KIDSCREEN-52, and School Connectedness. Some observations and recommendations for practice can be found on the page after.



Full sample



Your LA



The ‘honeymoon transition period’ described earlier is still evident across the four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#), even when we break the sample down by free school meal status, as we have on **Page 7**. Of additional note, however, is the fact that those in receipt of free school meals showed lower wellbeing scores across all four domains, showed more mental health symptoms, and reported lower school connectedness, than those who do not receive them. This finding is in line with research by [Moore et al.\(2024\)](#), who also found that lower socio-economic status was associated with both poorer mental health and wellbeing outcomes, and lower school connectedness. The authors suggest that school connectedness (**Page 8**) may be a mechanism to target to reduce these inequalities, and this may be done by:

Fostering positive relationships with school staff

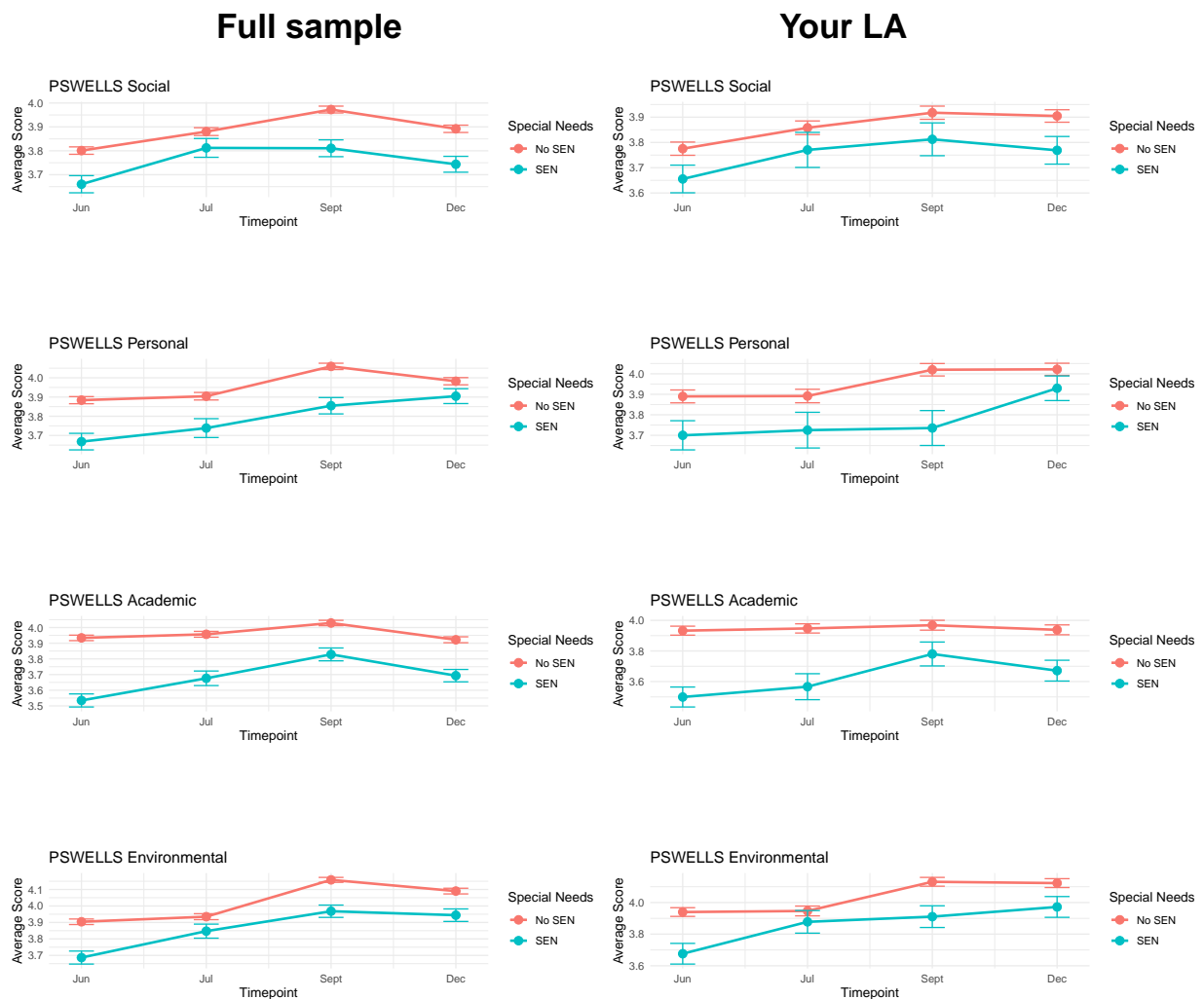
1. Development of trusting relationships with families by...
 - Identifying histories of families and school experiences to develop a better understanding of what support might be required for the families to support their child’s and their own transitions
 - Ongoing, open and respectful conversations through actively listening to parents’ and their child’s voice
 - Creating positive opportunities for parents to visit school/s, e.g., summer fair, school concerts...
2. Develop inclusive school culture that values and celebrates diversity, by...
 - Teachers and others’ role modelling it in everyday practice
 - Developing habits of heart in pupils through teaching of acceptance and welcoming of differences, active and empathetic listening, compassion for others and self, open-mindedness, perceived sense of control. These can be developed through diverse pedagogical approaches
 - Changing the negative discourse in the environment about transitions as well as free school meals or those requiring free school meals, for instance, through group discussions after showing a related movie or documentary
 - Creating cross socio-economic background peer groups/buddies

An earlier paper by [Moore et al. \(2020\)](#) focussed specifically on primary-secondary school transitions, and looked at factors within the school that influenced the relationship between socio-economic status and mental health and wellbeing outcomes. They found that pupils who were in receipt of free school meals, who moved to a secondary school that was more affluent than their primary school, had the poorest mental health wellbeing outcomes. This is because such pupils then assumed a more disadvantaged position in the socio-economic hierarchy than they did at their primary school. Their perception of the gap between themselves and other pupils widened, and their wellbeing decreased with this awareness. Again, the authors suggest that enhancing school connectedness is an important mechanism with which to address these perceptions.

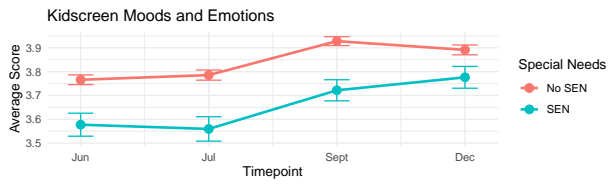
Changes over time - comparing your Local Authority with the whole sample - SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The below figures show the whole sample (first column) compared to your Local Authority (second column) broken down by Special Educational Needs status, for each of the measures.

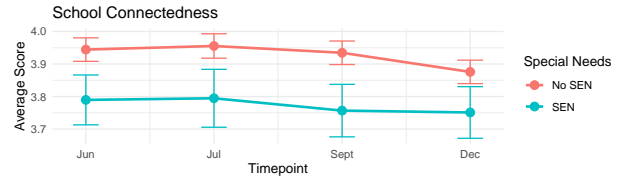
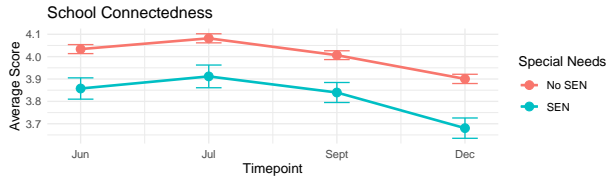
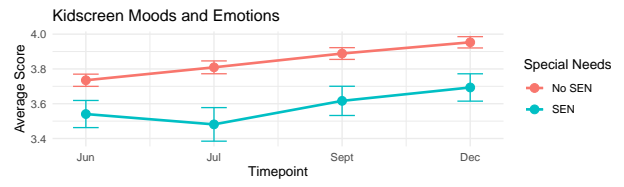
The current page shows the four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#), and the next page the “moods and emotions” subscale of the KIDSCREEN-52, and School Connectedness. Some observations and recommendations for practice can be found on the page after.



Full sample



Your LA



The figures on **Pages 10 and 11** show, overall, that those with a listed special educational need or disability (SEND) scored lower in the [#P-S WELLS](#) domains, showed more mental health symptoms, and reported lower school connectedness than those without this listed.

It is worth noting that all of the primary and secondary schools we worked with were mainstream schools. [Rathman et al. \(2018\)](#) found that children with SEND who attended mainstream schools not only reported lower life satisfaction than their peers, but it was also lower than of SEND children attending special schools. The authors suggest that implementing a truly inclusive school culture, that acknowledges and values different learning potentials, may reduce social comparison and the likelihood of bullying - both of which are likely to influence the wellbeing difference between SEND children in mainstream and in special education.

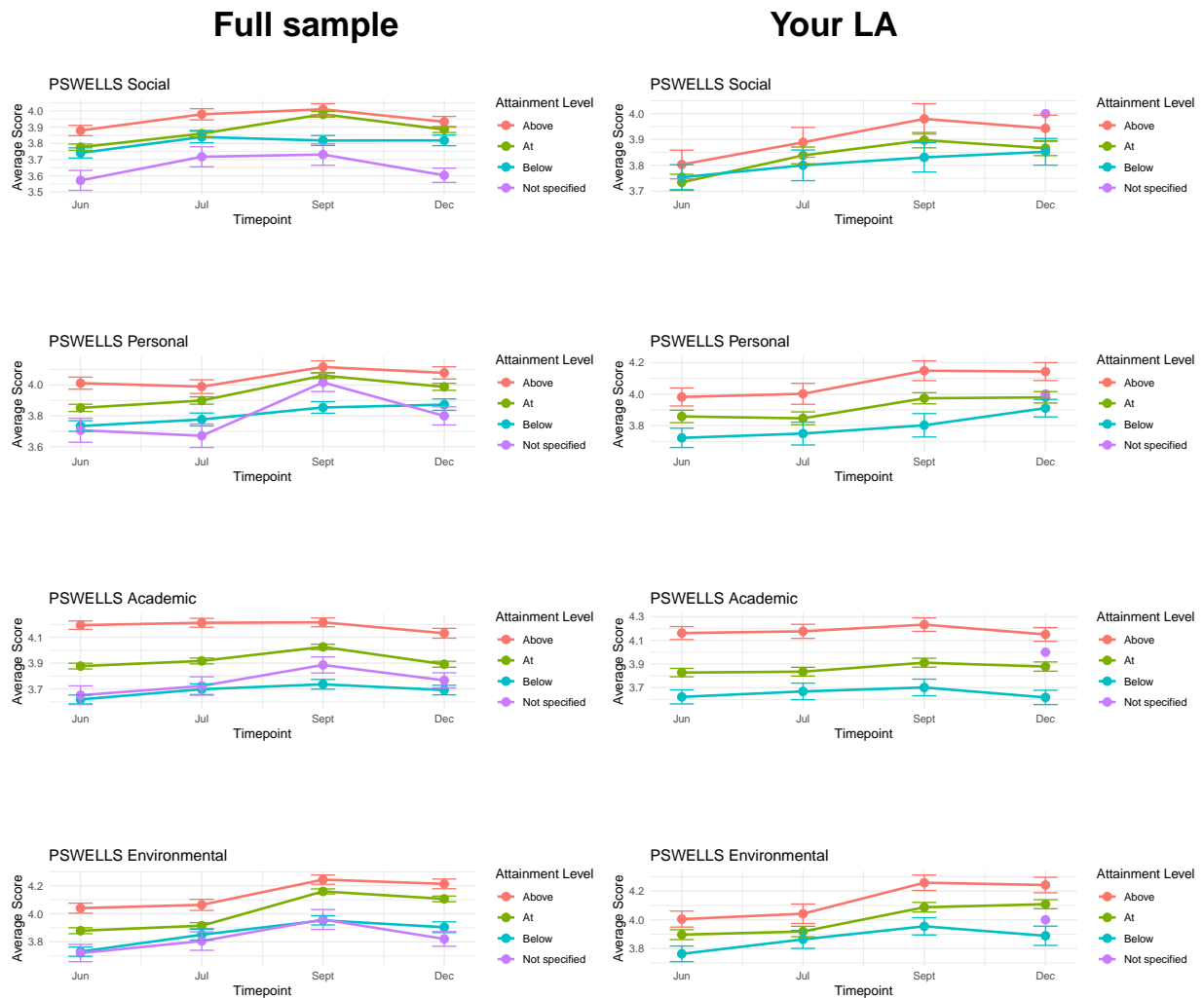
The recommendations made under the “free school meals” section remain relevant here. However, we additionally recommend facilitating:

1. Enhanced transitions support, including...
 - Early familiarisation with secondary school and staff, including multiple opportunities to visit the school, videos of the school and staff, visiting during quiet times
 - Understanding each pupils’ support needs, e.g., quiet spaces, starting and leaving school at different times from other pupils.
 - Identifying and making available resources and devices required by pupils with SEND, and giving them an opportunity to see them in situ
2. Encourage change in attitude towards diversity and different learning styles, by...
 - Encouraging all pupils to value and celebrate diversity through opportunities for meaningful interaction between all pupils, e.g., through small group projects where a diverse set of skills are required
 - Teachers valuing mastery goals over performance goals, and develop this attitude amongst the pupils and families as well
 - Teachers using diverse pedagogical approaches that meet the needs of different pupils
 - Using peer mentoring and cooperative learning

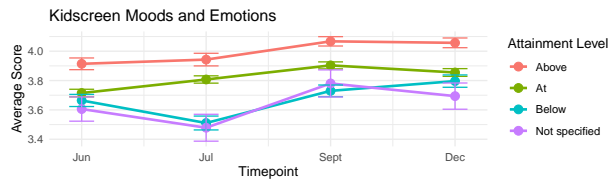
Changes over time - comparing your Local Authority with the whole sample - ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

The below figures show the whole sample (first column) compared to your Local Authority (second column) broken down by academic attainment level (above, at, or below), for each of the measures.

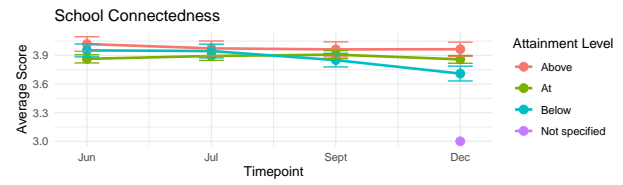
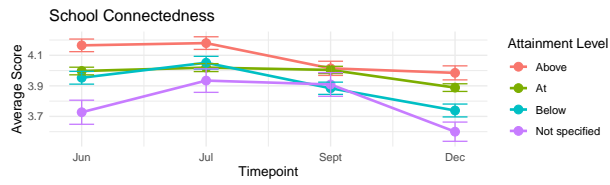
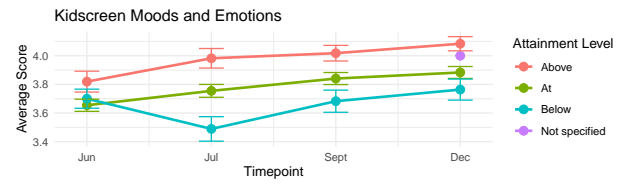
The current page shows the four domains of [#P-S WELLS](#), and the next page the “moods and emotions” subscale of the KIDSCREEN-52, and School Connectedness. Some observations and recommendations for practice can be found on the page after.



Full sample



Your LA



The figures for attainment (**Pages 13 and 14**) reveal some interesting patterns across the sample. Whilst the September peak is still slightly visible for most outcomes, it is certainly not as clear to see as with the previous sets of figures. What we can see, though, is that children with the highest academic attainment have the highest wellbeing outcomes overall, followed by those who are meeting their expected standards. Those with lower academic attainment tend to have the lowest wellbeing outcomes across [#P-S WELLS](#), mental health symptoms, and school connectedness.

Unsurprisingly, the difference is the clearest for the academic domain of [#P-S WELLS](#). This domain contains items that relate to homework, handling the changes in school work difficulty, and meeting expectations.

The relationship between attainment and emotional wellbeing has been explored in the literature, and has not always been as clear-cut as our findings, that pupils who are more academically capable are “happier”, might suggest. Indeed, low life satisfaction was associated with higher attainment in a study by [Clarke & McLellan \(2024\)](#). [Clarke \(2020\)](#) also suggests that high-stakes examinations and other performance-related pressures to do well can detrimentally impact wellbeing, and that these pressures may be felt more acutely by those who are academically capable. However, a recent study, looking at over 7,000 pupils across the UK from the ages of 5-16 found that changes in mental health predicted changes in attainment, and that issues with attention are particularly linked to low attainment ([van Poortvliet, 2024](#)). Interestingly, the author suggests that many children with poor wellbeing and high mental health symptoms, and low attainment, may have an undiagnosed need or disability. Therefore, those pupils in our sample with SEND and those with low attainment, even if they do not belong to both categories, may benefit from a similarly inclusive school culture, to bolster their self-efficacy and connectedness to school.

We recommend:

1. Encourage change in beliefs about own academic abilities, through...
 - Opportunities for articulation of academic abilities in a safe environment and scaffolding a change in attitude if required
 - Developing growth mindset through celebration of different types of attainments over time
 - Encourage and model the valuing of mastery goals over performance goals
2. Careful assigning of classwork and homework, by...
 - Provision of coordinated homework across subjects (at secondary school) so that the volume is not overwhelming
 - Gradual increase of difficulty level of class and homework so that it is not overwhelming
 - Focusing on formative rather than summative assessments during the first few months of secondary school
 - Using peer mentoring or cooperative learning