

Bishop Martin Seeley writes...

Teenagers in the UK have the lowest levels of life satisfaction in Europe, and the trend is worsening.

According to research conducted by the Church of England's Children's Society, more than one in three UK 15-year-olds scored low in life satisfaction.

Every year The Children's Society researches young people's well-being by asking them to score how happy they are with a range of different aspects of their life such as family, home life, school, friends and their future.

The results are published in the "Good Childhood Report" and the latest edition has just come out.

While the trends reported this year have been evident for some time, the pandemic has brought them into a sharp focus.

The responses of the young people surveyed revealed a significant decrease in young people's happiness with life as a whole.

Combine that with the finding that young people aged 15 in the UK had the greatest fear of failure, and the lowest overall life satisfaction across the 24 European countries in the study, and we see just how serious the situation for young people here is today.

Children in the UK also scored the lowest results in Europe when it came to having a sense of purpose, with two in five saying their lives lacked clear meaning and purpose.

Mark Russell, head of the Children's Society, said in response to the findings: "We all want our children to grow up happy, and as a society we can't be content with children in the UK being the most unsatisfied with their lives in Europe. It has to change.

"Modern life has been chipping away at our children's happiness during the last decade.

"Even before the pandemic, which we know has taken a huge toll on our children's well-being, many felt their life didn't have a sense of purpose. We believe it is not only a fear of failure, but also rising child poverty levels that could partly be to blame.

"We must listen to children's voices and work with them to shape changes in schools, communities and society that will support them to have happy and fulfilled childhoods."

More than a year ago a group of us launched a report by the University of Suffolk on young people's experiences in Suffolk, and we have spent the last year working at implementing the recommendations.

And shortly we will be publishing findings of a survey of Suffolk young people about how they are faring during COVID 19, which will help us see how the Children's Society findings are borne out in Suffolk.

The report last year highlighted the need for safe spaces for youngsters to meet – and with the help of a new "Youth Intervention Fund" many new spaces and facilities were being developed – constrained of course by the pandemic.

The report also underlined the importance of consulting with young people on matters that concern them – which as the long term effect of the pandemic becomes more evident, means pretty much everything.

So we have put in place in Suffolk various steps to do what the Children's Society recognises is a national challenge.

We have set about designing a “tool kit” to help community organisations, businesses, and local government engage with young people seriously as they seek to make plans that will impact on our younger generation.

We cannot presume we know the answers for what young people need, or how they would tackle particular challenges, or what shaped world they would want to see, indeed what would help them be happier.

We need to ask – which is not to say, then simply do what youngsters tell us – but ask, and discuss, and debate with everyone concerned, including our young people.

These and other initiatives are all to help the well-being of young people in our county, and to reverse the trend of unhappiness.

And there is a deeper dimension here – the Good Childhood Report’s results on young people’s sense of purpose and fear of failure are alarming.

To me these are spiritual issues – what is my life about, and is my value only in success?

These are questions that faith helps us find answers to, but why are people of faith making little connection to young people longing for answers?

During my life-time, faith in God has receded into the background in our society.

Life is about us human beings, and what we make of it, so in a profound way people see life as depending on them and their own efforts.

So of course we fear of failure, and lack of purpose looms large, because we think it is all up to us.

But seeing ourselves and our world as created by God, and God whose whole being is about love, of everyone, and all creation, places who we are and what we are for in a completely different frame.

Most people used to have some sense that that was true, even if it did not loom large in their lives, but they would turn to that understanding particularly in times of crisis.

Now that is not the case, and the reasoned arguments for why God does not exist hold perilous sway.

And we see how our society, and our young people, are paying the price of life without a framework beyond ourselves.

And that is a challenge for those of us who do believe in the reality of God, to rebuild in our society the recognition that this is as true today, as it has ever been.