How To Reach Vulnerable Students Who Don't Speak Up

Introducing weekly wellbeing check-Ins with Smoothwall Pulse - helping you to exceed KCSIE wellbeing guidance
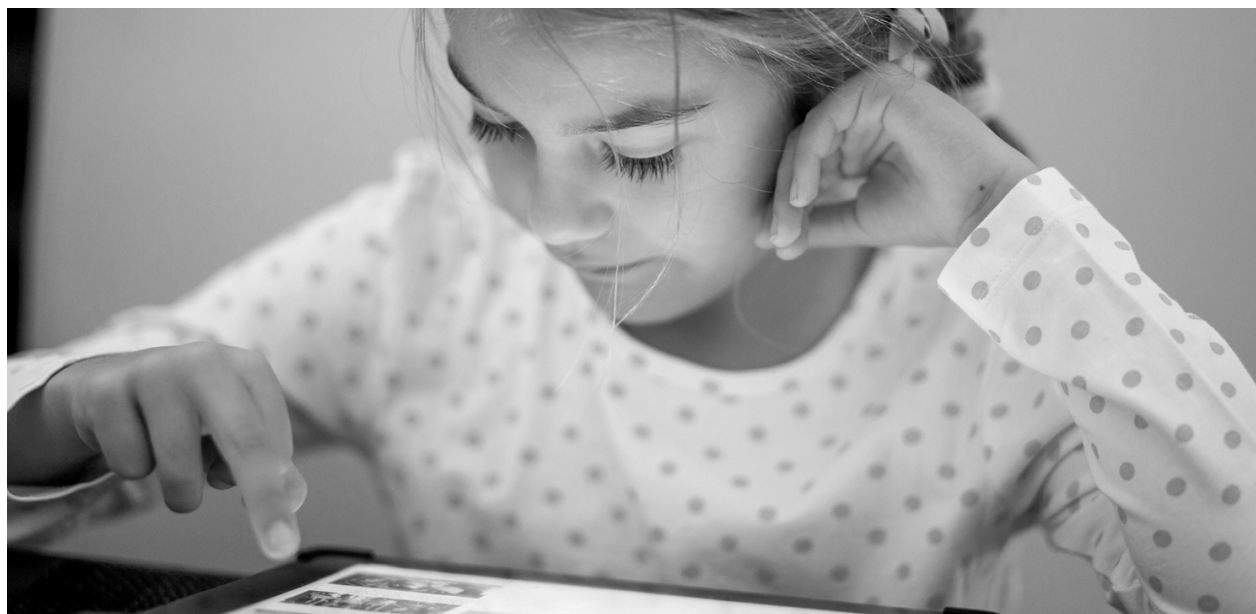
smoothwall®
by Qoria

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Introduction

Schools recognise that supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people has never been more important.

In 2021, 1 in 6 children had a probable mental health disorder, up from 1 in 9 in 2017. According to the recently published Good Childhood Report, 1 in 10 children now have 'low wellbeing.'

The challenge for schools across the UK, is understanding the wellbeing concerns that exist in their students' worlds. They can remain hidden, out of sight and uncommunicated.

As KCSIE (Keeping Children Safe In Education) reminds us; children and young people may not always feel able or aware of how to seek support when it comes to issues surrounding their own wellbeing, safety and mental health.

Students whose wellbeing needs go unmet, can be left vulnerable to longer term mental health disorders into adulthood. Poor wellbeing health may also leave some students susceptible to serious, or harmful behaviours towards themselves or/and others.

In this guide we look at how schools and MATs can introduce revolutionary app-based student 'Weekly Wellbeing Check-Ins,' that encourage students with wellbeing concerns to speak up and seek support.

"

Wellbeing crucially recognises the aspects
of our lives that we determine ourselves:
through our own capabilities as individuals,
how we feel about ourselves, the quality of
the relationships that we have with other
people and our sense of purpose."

**The UK's Independent Body for Wellbeing,
Policy and Practice**

Student Wellbeing

'Wellbeing' can be a catch-all term to describe several states of being. It may seem difficult to measure wellbeing because it can be rather conceptual.

What exactly is student wellbeing?

Conceptualising wellbeing in a way that feels both relevant and measurable starts with looking at what students need to thrive in their lives.

The internationally recognised Nest Framework (see page 6, Ref.1) for Children and Young People provides useful definitions of the areas that contribute to a student's overall wellbeing. Wellbeing is viewed in terms of how effectively the different elements of a student's life are catered for.

In order to thrive, a young person must have adequate resources across six areas (see page 6, Ref.1). These six areas should work together to help students to reach their full potential.

You can see that the framework identifies other needs that go beyond conventional 'learning' that schools were historically tasked with.

Having material basics, feeling safe, being healthy, part of a group and having a strong sense of identity and belonging all play a part too.

A broader definition and framework helps us to understand and conceptualise what student wellbeing is.

But why is it so important for schools to focus on student wellbeing and why do we need to make it easier for students with poor wellbeing health to speak up?

Reference 1: The Nest Framework

A student must have adequate resources across the six areas highlighted below in order to thrive and reach their full potential.
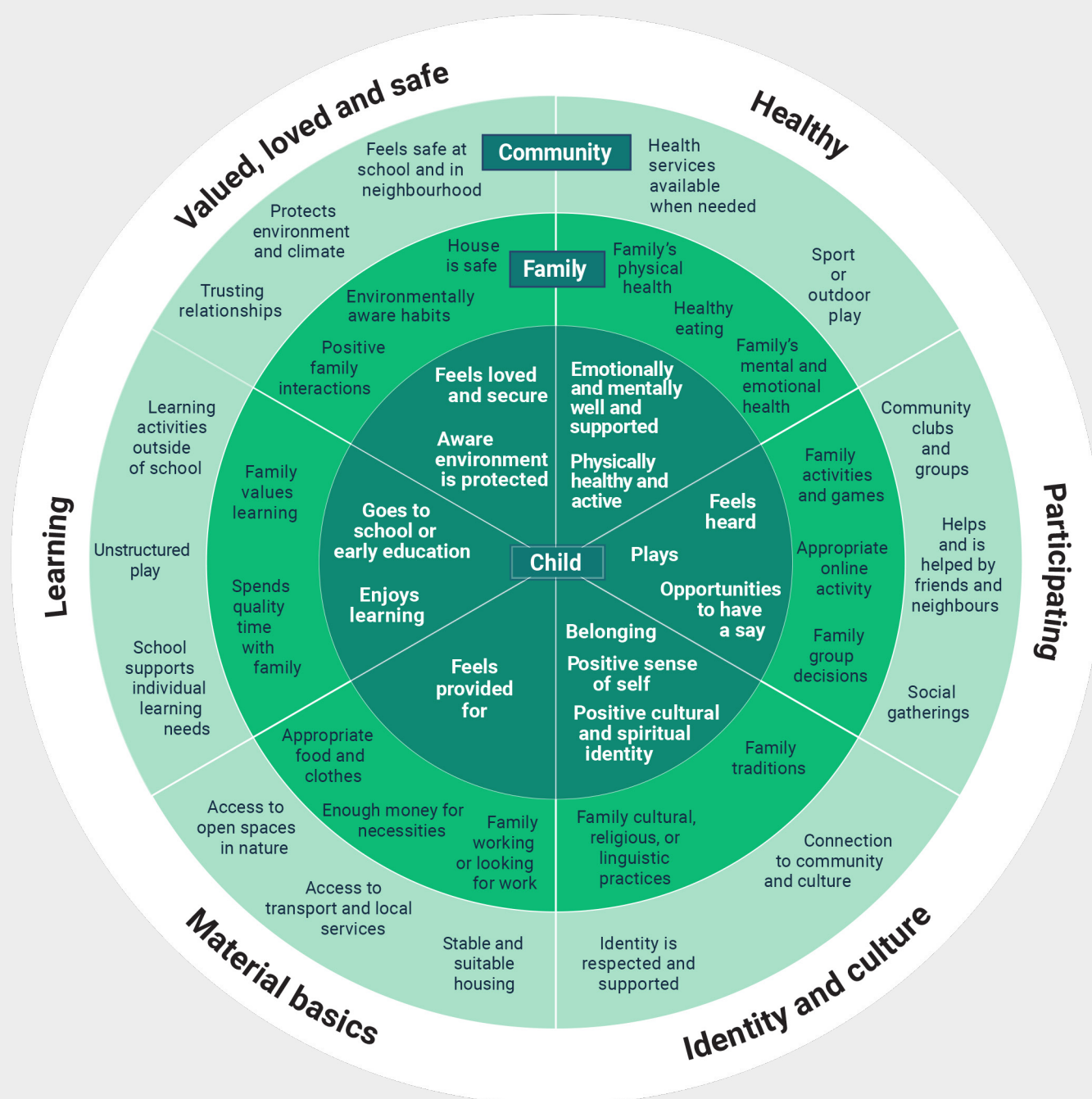
The Case for Centralising Wellbeing

Headline news and empirical research are placing the spotlight on low student wellbeing. **But why?**

Ample research into children and young people's behaviours indicate that in our post-pandemic world, wellbeing levels aren't where they need to be.

In 2022 1.2 million children were referred to children and young people's mental health services - an increase of nearly 53% since 2019.

According to the recent Good Childhood Report, children's average happiness with life as a whole, friends, appearance and school were all significantly lower in 2019-20 than ten years prior.

For today's students, there are a number of factors that can prevent the wellbeing needs we noted from being met. Some of these factors, not exhaustively, are listed below.

Appearance:

A student may have low self-esteem about their own bodies and physical appearance, partly driven by social media content that promotes perceptions on how they think they 'should look.'

1 in 5 girls are unhappy with their appearance according to The Good Childhood Report, 2022.

37% of teenagers feel upset and 31% feel ashamed of their body image. (Mental Health Foundation, 2019)

Bullying:

Both offline and more frequently online, students can become victims of abuse or aggression from peers both in person, or via social or gaming platforms and messaging apps. This can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing.

1 child in every classroom experiences bullying every day. (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2022)

Approximately 1 in 5 children aged 10-15 years experiences at least one type of online bullying (ons.gov.uk, 2020)

Cost of Living Crisis:

Given the current cost of living crisis, some children and young people feel isolated if they are unable to cope with worries about money, or can't afford to do things with family or friends. They also absorb the anxiety that their parents experience. This, in turn, can have a negative impact on their wellbeing.

According to Young Minds the cost of living was a 'major worry' for 56% of young people in August 2022 (up from 50% in May 2022). They reported disruption to daily life, their diet and sleep.

Domestic Abuse/Home Safety:

Students who feel unsafe at home due to being victims of or living in fear of domestic abuse can feel lonely, angry, confused and powerless. This can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and low self-worth.

UK Police made almost a quarter of a million child protection referrals in 2020/21 to social services, an 8% increase on the previous year. (NSPCC)

Exam Stress and School Life:

Students can feel overwhelmed by the pressure of living up to perceived expectations relating to exams, this can affect eating or sleeping habits, or lead to feelings of depression.

80%+ of headteachers have reported that stress and anxiety among students taking their exams in 2021 was higher than in pre-pandemic years. (Association of School and College Leaders, 2021)

More children are unhappy with school than with the other aspects of life they are asked about. (The Good Childhood Report, 2022)

Social Media/Online Gaming Usage:

Easy access to digital devices has caused an increase in both social media and online gaming usage, a trend that has continued to rise since lockdown.

This can leave students vulnerable to online addiction, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), online grooming or access to harmful/inappropriate content. This may include content relating to gang violence, self-harm or suicide ideation.

More than 36% of children aged 8-17 years said they have seen something worrying or nasty online. (Ofcom, 2022)

Self-harm incidents per 100 children and young people per year was 315 in the 3 months January to March 2022, an increase of 53% year on year. (Gov.uk)

Substance Abuse:

Students who are upset or angry may turn to drugs or alcohol to help them manage their feelings.

Although they think this helps it can make them feel worse, and lead to hopelessness, irritability and negative thoughts.

11k+ young people came into contact with drug and alcohol services between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. (Gov.uk)

KCSIE and Student Wellbeing

The most recent KCSIE guidance makes a number of references to 'wellbeing' throughout. It states schools are required to; 'play an important role in the mental health and wellbeing of pupils' (section 180).
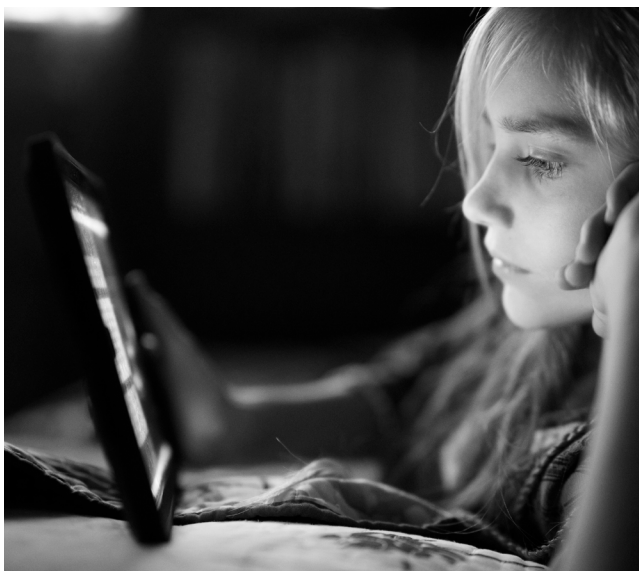
As a reminder, here are other key aspects of KCSIE guidance that mention student wellbeing.

- Some students might not necessarily feel comfortable vocalising to staff or know how to speak to someone if their wellbeing needs aren't being me. 'All staff should be aware that children may not feel ready or know how to tell someone that they are being abused, exploited, or neglected, and/or they may not recognise their experiences as harmful. For example, children may feel embarrassed, humiliated, or threatened.' This shouldn't stop staff from having a 'professional curiosity' and speaking to a DSL if they have any concerns about a child (section 19).

- It's important that staff determine how best to build trusted relationships with children and young people which facilitates communication (section 19).

- Reference is made to staff being aware of indicators that a change of wellbeing may indicate a child is at risk from or involved with serious crime (section 48).

Wellbeing and improved learning outcomes

The link between student wellbeing and academic outcomes is well established. An impact study led by Oxford University found that by taking a 'whole school' approach to wellbeing led to long term educational engagement, easier transitions from primary to secondary school and decreased probability of school drop out. It advises that by taking the steps below, schools can promote positive wellbeing health.

1. Put monitoring systems in place to keep track of and adjust implementation as needed.

2. Take an integrated and cross level school and classroom approach.

3. Actively engage the wider community, including parents.

4. Ensure that sufficient time and resources are available to support implementation.

Wellbeing and parental engagement

Pressure for school staff to play a key role in student wellbeing is exacerbated by the fact that some parents in the home environment feel ill-equipped or unsure of the wellbeing issues that exist in their child's world.

Since the pandemic, children have continued to spend more time online, where poor wellbeing can remain invisible to parents. This places more pressure on schools to understand wellbeing issues at play in their students' lives and help educate parents on how they can best support their children.

>
> There is convincing evidence of a relationship between wellbeing and academic attainment."
>
> **Dr. Ariel Lindorff**
> **Department of Education**
> **University of Oxford.**

Wellbeing in Schools:
The Current State of Play

How do schools currently diagnose wellbeing health?

Whilst schools recognise the need to place more resources and focus on student wellbeing, there isn't currently a standard approach to how it is identified and addressed.

To try and understand how students are feeling, schools may carry out activities such as:

- Annual online or/and paper-based surveys to gain a snapshot of the wellbeing climate of their school.

- Play-based activities or games to encourage students to share their feelings.

- Drop-in sessions with the school's DSL, Counsellor, or Head of Year for students to share any concerns.

Limitations to the current approach

There are benefits to accumulating annual wellbeing data and there is certainly a requirement for in-person pastoral care. However, there are challenges for DSLs when solely using these current methods. Taking a whole-school approach and identifying the most vulnerable students with poor wellbeing health quickly and effectively can prove difficult. Here's why.

Wellbeing needs can change on a daily, weekly or monthly basis

Student wellbeing needs can change daily, weekly, monthly or annually. This means that timely intervention is critical. For example, a child that doesn't have food at home due to the cost of living crisis needs to be identified immediately, not weeks or months later. Annual surveys provide a snapshot in time, but they don't allow for rapid intervention.

Solely relying on annual wellbeing tracking can also mean that a child temporarily feels okay at the point in time the survey is taken, yet ongoing issues remain. More regular insights are needed to support school safeguarding teams. To help them understand the immediate needs students face and prevent other issues occurring in the future.

> Student wellbeing needs can change daily, weekly, monthly or annually.

The Iceberg Effect

One of the biggest challenges for DSLs when managing and understanding student wellbeing is the; 'you don't know, what you don't know' conundrum. There may be visual clues that a student has wellbeing concerns. For example, the student may display injury or bruises or is absent from school.

However, some students may feel embarrassed and unable to verbalise or even recognise wellbeing issues that exist in their world. They may fear the consequences of speaking out and seeking help. If they are victims of bullying for example, they may not feel comfortable immediately seeking support in person for fear of repercussions.

Wellbeing issues may also manifest online, or at home, not necessarily in view of a DSL or teacher, making them difficult to detect.

We call this the Iceberg effect. Wellbeing issues may present themselves clearly, at the top of the iceberg where visual clues exist. However, some clues exist below the waterline, where they remain hidden.

DSLs need a tool to give them much greater visibility of student wellbeing so that they can prioritise which students need the quickest attention and intervene to bring about positive change.

Offline risks
you can see

Changes in behaviour. Injuries/bruises, tip offs from peers, absenteeism.

Digital risks
you can't see

Online bullying or conversations about drugs/extremism/being harmed, hidden bruises/injuries, unspoken negative feelings and thoughts.

The need to develop a positive wellbeing culture

Positive student wellbeing can be linked to a healthy wellbeing culture that exists between staff-and-students and peer-to-peer.

Yet for busy school staff, nurturing this culture can be another item on a very long to-do list. An easier, more efficient and effective way is needed to bring about a healthy wellbeing culture that is visceral amongst both staff and students.

Poor wellbeing health can exist at an individual, group or whole school level

For example, research tells us that SEND students are more vulnerable to bullying from peers. It might be that within a school or MAT students are experiencing similar issues.

Current methods make it difficult to identify wellbeing issues amongst such groups. DSLs need the evidence to help them intervene at both an individual and group level, to quickly address the needs of more vulnerable groups.

We've identified above a number of obstacles to overcome when it comes to adequately managing student wellbeing. So, how can DSLs and school staff easily and quickly address all these challenges?

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Smoothwall Pulse

Schools need a more effective tool to help them overcome these challenges. **Smoothwall Pulse is here to help.**

Smoothwall Pulse is a revolutionary digital wellbeing tool that can be accessed via a user-friendly app or any desktop device. It provides students with easy access to a weekly 60 second 'check-in' where they can report on their wellbeing and seek further in-person support.

It provides DSLs with insights and trends into student wellbeing at an individual, cohort/group and whole school level and makes wellbeing concerns that were previously invisible, visible via an easy-to-use dashboard. This means quick, timely intervention and future prevention of student wellbeing issues.

Pulse check-ins help schools transform:

- From measuring to monitoring

- From intuitive to evidence-based decision-making

- From out-of-date to up-to-date approaches and methods.

- From tunnel-vision to full-field perspective

- From insight to action

How does it work?

Smoothwall Pulse gathers data from every student in the school and can be completed in less than 60 seconds.

1. Once a week participants are prompted to answer five questions using the Smoothwall Pulse school app.

2. Students that need help can use the check-in to reach out to a nominated staff member.

3. Each week the questions change so different data points can be captured over time.

4. A unique picture of student wellbeing health begins to emerge every week, with a colour coded 'map' displaying wellbeing concerns that require more urgent attention.

5. There is also the option for students to show 'gratitude' peer-to-peer or student-to-teacher.

Cutting-edge wellbeing technology

Smoothwall Pulse is an AI-driven application. The AI engine adapts every week to ask different questions and uses real-time insights to provide guidance on immediate next steps. Predictive insights also mean that DSLs can put preventative measures in place before a major wellbeing issue arises.
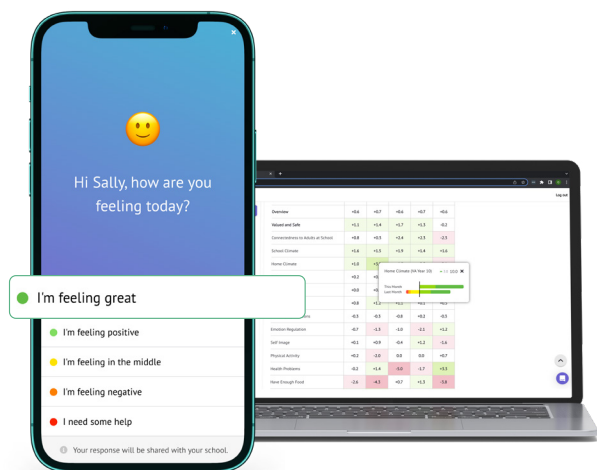
Helping schools to meet KCSIE

Smoothwall Pulse also helps schools to clearly demonstrate that they meet KCSIE wellbeing guidance by:

- Demonstrating that they are taking seriously the important role schools play in supporting student wellbeing.

- Providing a communication channel for students who may not feel comfortable vocalising to staff in person that their wellbeing needs aren't being met.

- Evidencing that staff are attempting to build trusted relationships with children and young people which facilitates communication.

- Gaining visibility of indicators of a change in student wellbeing that may indicate a child is at risk from or involved with serious crime.
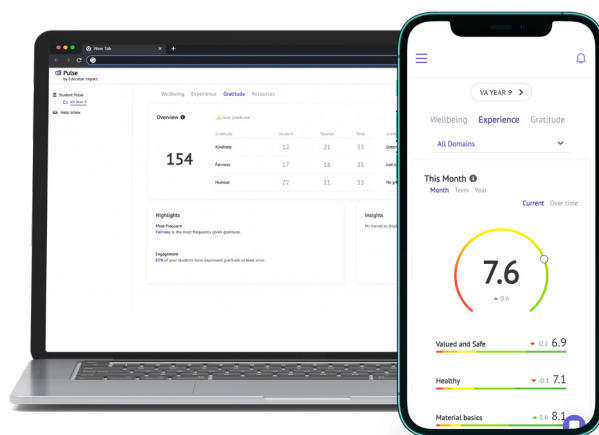
What does this mean for schools?

In summary, Smoothwall Pulse helps DSLs to:

- Easily and quickly spot student wellbeing concerns and trends at a student, group and school level.

- Use data-driven evidence to help guide future school wellbeing initiatives.

- Easily nurture a healthy wellbeing culture between staff and students and peer-to-peer by giving them an easy-to-use platform to show gratitude.

Conclusions

We hope this document has helped you to understand more about how Smoothwall Pulse can improve the wellbeing health across your school, college or MAT.

Want to find out how Smoothwall Pulse can improve student wellbeing across your school, college or MAT?

If you have any further questions about Smoothwall Pulse or would like to arrange a short demonstration, please contact us at enquiries@smoothwall.com.

We're ready to help.

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Smoothwall is the leading provider of digital safeguarding solutions in UK education. For more information, visit our website or get in touch with our team of experts.

Web: www.smoothwall.com
Tel: +44 (0)800 047 8191
Email: enquiries@smoothwall.com

Qoria

Smoothwall is part of Qoria, a global technology company, dedicated to keeping children safe and well in their digital lives. We harness the power of connection to close the gaps that children fall through, and to seamlessly support them on all sides - at school, at home and everywhere in between.

Find out more
www.qoria.com