



# GENERATION ISOLATION

ONSIDE'S ANNUAL  
STUDY INTO YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
LIVES OUTSIDE SCHOOL

November 2024



 [onsideyouthzones.org](https://onsideyouthzones.org)

# CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Methodology	4
Key Findings	5
Kiara's story	6
Part 1 - Young people's lives	7
Free time	8
Spotlight on smartphones	13
Spotlight on loneliness	17
Trusted adults	18
Out of school opportunities	19
Wellbeing	21
Part 2 - Young people and youth services	23
Youth club exposure	24
Youth club impacts	25
The positive difference	26
Youth centre considerations	27
Youth centre perceptions	28
Ethan's Story	29
About OnSide	30



# FOREWORD

**This is the third Generation Isolation report, OnSide's annual study to help us better understand how young people spend their leisure time.**

With 85% of a young person's time spent outside school, the experiences, opportunities and support they are provided during this time plays a vital role — by shaping happy, well-rounded young people who develop into confident, emotionally and physically healthy adults. Yet this time outside of school receives relatively little public or political attention compared with the time spent in school.

We wanted to help to change this, by lifting the lid on the social lives of young people and why it matters.

Generation Isolation has helped us build a heartbreakingly consistent picture of young people's lives outside school. Heartbreaking because year after year the study has shown us that young people's free time is characterised by screen-based interaction and isolation, which is harming their wellbeing.

This year's findings sadly maintain this picture, with 76% of young people spending most of their free time on screens, a rise in those reporting anxiety (51%), and new insight showing almost half of young people (44%) reporting loneliness.

To deepen the value of this study, we've gone beyond exploring what young people do and asked why. It's perhaps no surprise that

smartphone use is now the most time consuming activity for young people. When asked why, young people said this is driven by habit, boredom and fear of missing out. Many also reported a lack of safe spaces to socialise in person. Almost a quarter (24%) of young people say they have more friends they can talk to online than in real life.

Yet it was fascinating to also learn that despite the addictive lure of smartphones, young people want to make different choices but need support to do so. Over half (52%) of the most avid smartphone users said they want to reduce their smartphone use, but almost half (46%) admitted not knowing how to do this.

In many ways highlighting a problem is easy, but we must look at solutions. This year, we sought young people's views on what those solutions could be. When asked what one thing would improve their lives outside school, their message was clear: Nearly a third (29%) want more affordable leisure activities, almost a quarter (24%) want more safe and fun places to socialise, and 16% want more opportunities to learn skills outside of school. Youth clubs offer all of these and more.

Although only 15% of those surveyed currently attend a youth centre, the positive feedback from

those who do was encouraging. 93% of youth centre attendees said it has made a positive difference, with most citing the friendships and social interactions they gained. As we continue our work to rebuild opportunities for young people across the UK, it was also a positive sign to see a small increase in the percentage that reported attending a youth centre this year.

Generation Isolation ultimately shows that we are failing to meet young people's needs effectively. There is a clear gap between what young people want to do, and what is available to them. If we are serious about helping young people thrive, we must act now to provide in-real-life opportunities that are more compelling than life through a screen. Investment in vibrant youth provision can no longer be an afterthought — it must become a right and reality for all young people.



**Jamie Masraff**  
Chief Executive, OnSide

# METHODOLOGY

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 5,213 young people. Fieldwork was taken between 23 August-6 September 2024.

The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all England 11 to 18 year olds.

Wellbeing measure based on an existing wellbeing scale developed and reported by the ONS.



# GENERATION ISOLATION: KEY FINDINGS

To empower and support young people at scale and advocate for investment in support for them, we need to deeply understand the reality of their lives, what they do and crucially why they do it. To do this, we asked 5,213 young people aged 11-18 about their lives outside of school.

These are the key findings:

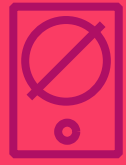
**76%** of young people spend most of their free time on screens\*.



**24%** of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone, making it the most time consuming activity outside of school.



**52%** of young people that spend most time on their smartphone would like to reduce this.



**18%** of young people spend most of their free time alone.



**48%** of young people spend most of their free time in their bedroom.



**85%** of young people do not attend a youth centre.



**93%** of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives.



**35%** of young people who say youth centres make a positive difference say it is because of making new friends/social interactions.



**51%** of young people reported high or very high feelings of anxiety\*\*.



**44%** of young people reported high or very high feelings of loneliness\*\*\*.



**35%** of young people do not have opportunities to meet new people and make friends.



**29%** of young people say more affordable leisure activities would make the most difference to improve their life outside of school.



\* 76% of young people surveyed spending most of their free time on screens (watching streamed content like Netflix/YouTube, gaming, spending time on their phone, or watching TV).

\*\* Anxiety measure based on an existing well-being scale developed and reported by the ONS.

\*\*\* Loneliness measure informed by a similar existing wellbeing scale developed and reported by the ONS.

# KIARA'S STORY

Joining The Hive, Wirral Youth Zone has helped Kiara (18) build social connection and discover her dream career.

“

*I joined the Youth Zone as I used to just sit in my room on my phone all the time and it wasn't good for my confidence. I stayed in the house and didn't interact with people.*

*When I first joined I felt overwhelmed and shy as I didn't know the layout of the building, or many people and I found it hard at times, so I sat on my own.*

*But I started to become more comfortable and confident as one of the staff members, Jo got me involved in the different activities. It helped to come regularly as well.*

*I love coming now as I feel more confident. It has helped me with my self-esteem, and it feels like a second home. I know that the staff are here to support me, and they give me great advice.*

*I struggled a lot with my mental health at first because I just felt anxious with trying to make new friends and trying different activities as well as communicating how I felt when I got upset.*

*I have been able to work on my communication to help express how I was feeling and set boundaries*

*with people. Now I can communicate and I have made some new friends.*

*I have also found that doing sports has massively built my confidence because it has shown me not to give up and to be more positive even if things don't go well. I've tried new sports that I wouldn't have tried before and I have really got into playing football as a goalkeeper. The support from the sports staff has been amazing as they have helped me to try these new things and pushed me out of my comfort zone.*

*I've learned to work hard and not let any barriers stop me. It has been very inspiring, and I have a more positive outlook about the future as I am considering doing a career in sports, I am thinking about coaching. Through the Youth Zone, I got to speak to an actual player and ask them questions!*

*Attending the Youth Zone has helped me to look to the future in terms of my aspirations and helped me to try different things. I have had great support from the staff which has made a positive impact on my life.*

”

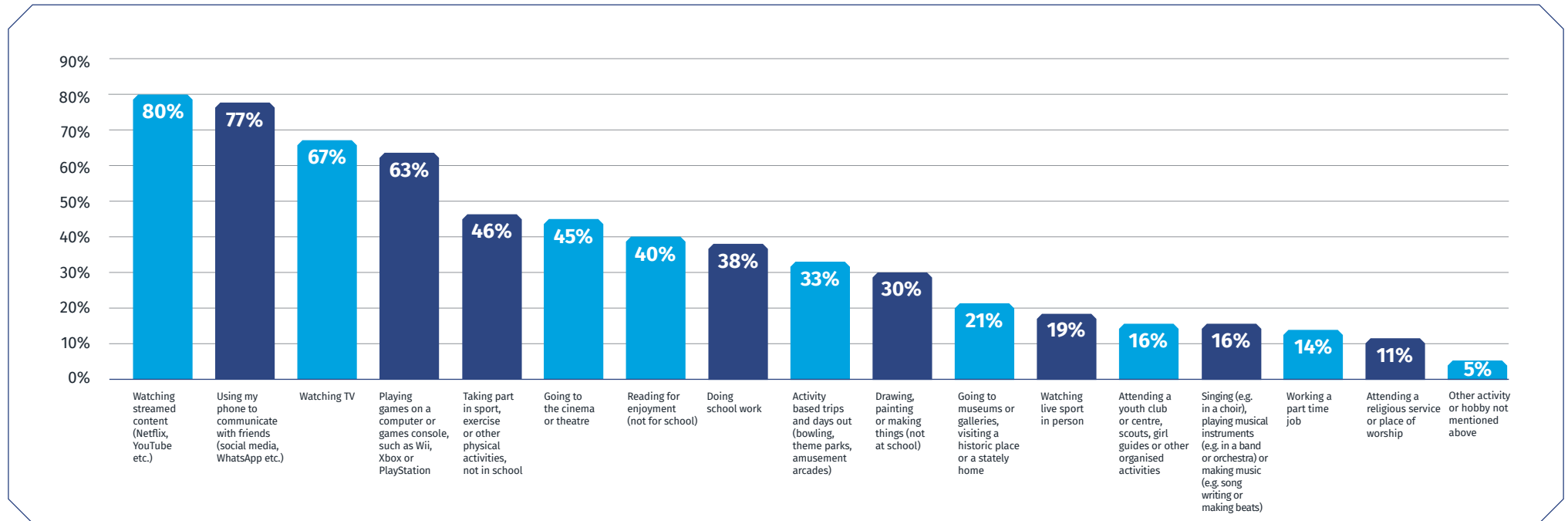


# PART 1 YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES



# HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME?

We asked 'Which of these activities do you do in your free time now (i.e. the time when you are not in school?)'



## Top 4 free time activities

**80%** of young people spend time watching streamed content in their free time outside of school.

**77%** of young people use their phone to communicate with friends in their free time outside of school.

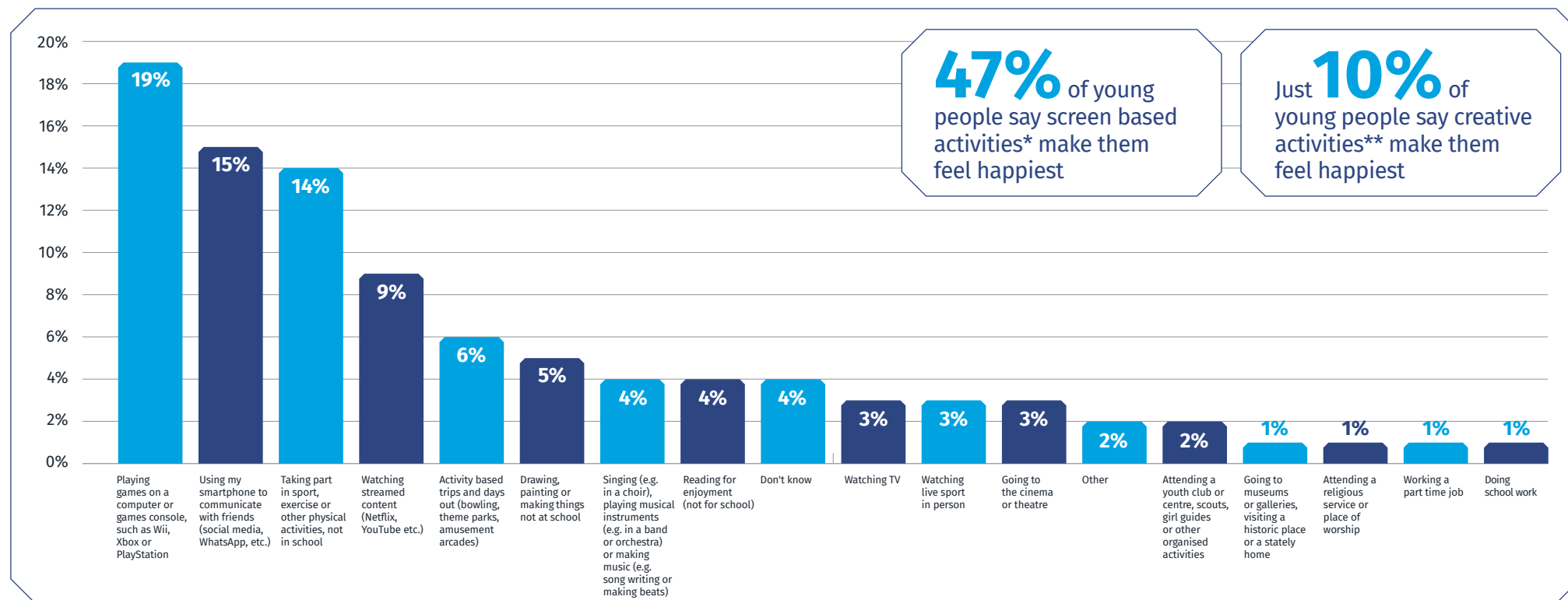
**67%** of young people watch TV in their free time outside of school.

**63%** of young people play computer games in their free time outside of school.



# WHAT ACTIVITIES MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL HAPPIEST?

We asked 'Which ONE of the activities you do in your free time makes you happiest?'



## The top 4 activities driving young people's happiness are

**Gaming**  
– almost 1 in 5 young people (19%) said gaming makes them feel happiest.

**15%** of young people said using their smartphone makes them feel happiest.

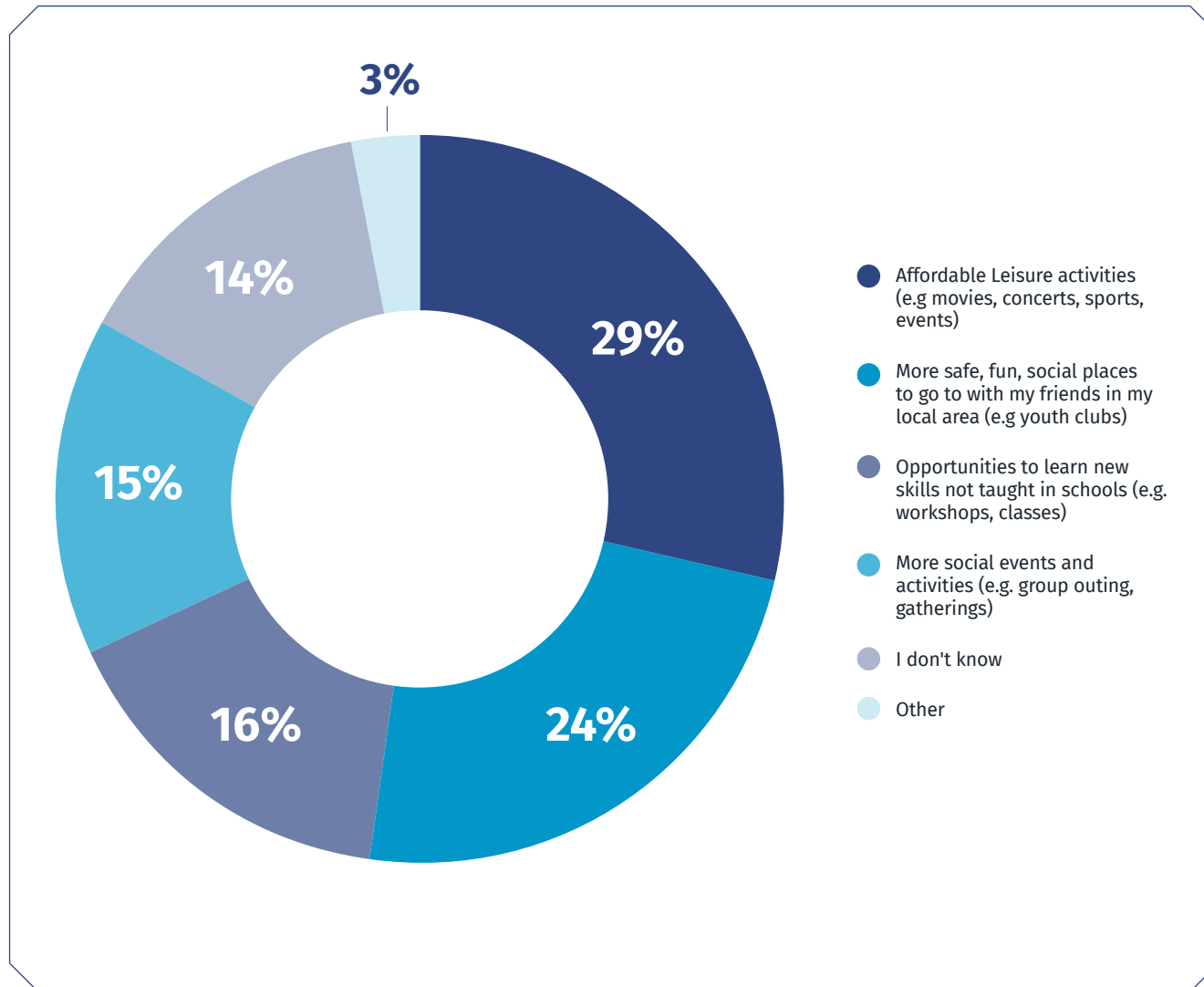
**14%** of young people said taking part in sport and exercise outside of school makes them feel happiest.

**9%** of young people said watching streamed content makes them feel happiest.

\*47% of young people say screen based activities make them feel happiest (watching streamed content like Netflix/YouTube, gaming, spending time on their phone or watching TV).  
10% of young people say creative activities\*\* make them feel happiest (Singing (e.g. in a choir), playing musical instruments (e.g. in a band or orchestra) or making music (e.g. song writing or making beats), Drawing, painting).

# IMPROVING LIFE OUTSIDE SCHOOL

We asked 'What is the MOST important thing that could be done to help you enjoy the time you spend outside of school?'



Almost a third of young people (**29%**) said that more affordable leisure activities would improve their life outside of school.



Almost a quarter (**24%**) said more safe, fun, social places to go to with friends in their local area (like youth clubs).

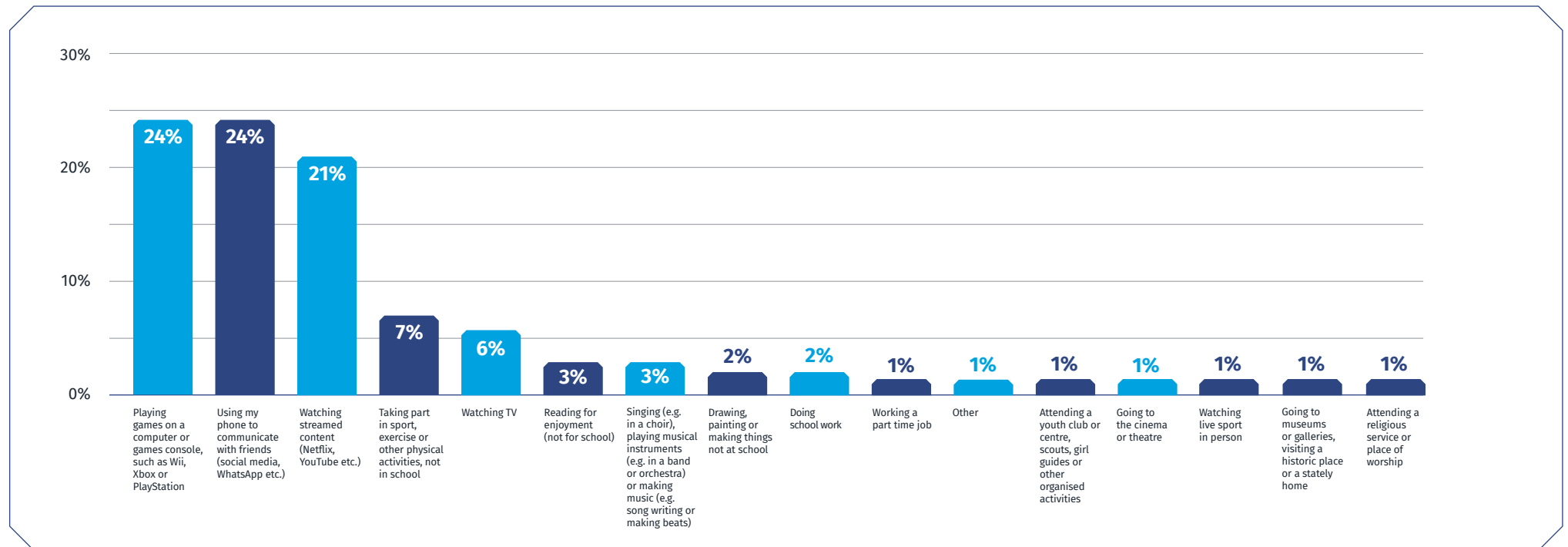


**16%** cited opportunities to learn new skills not taught in school.



# WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOST TIME CONSUMING FREE TIME ACTIVITIES?

We asked 'Which one of these activities do you spend most of your free time (i.e. the time when you are not in school) doing?'



## Top 3 most time consuming activities

**24%** of young people say they spend most of their leisure time using their smartphone to communicate with friends (compared with 22% in 2023)



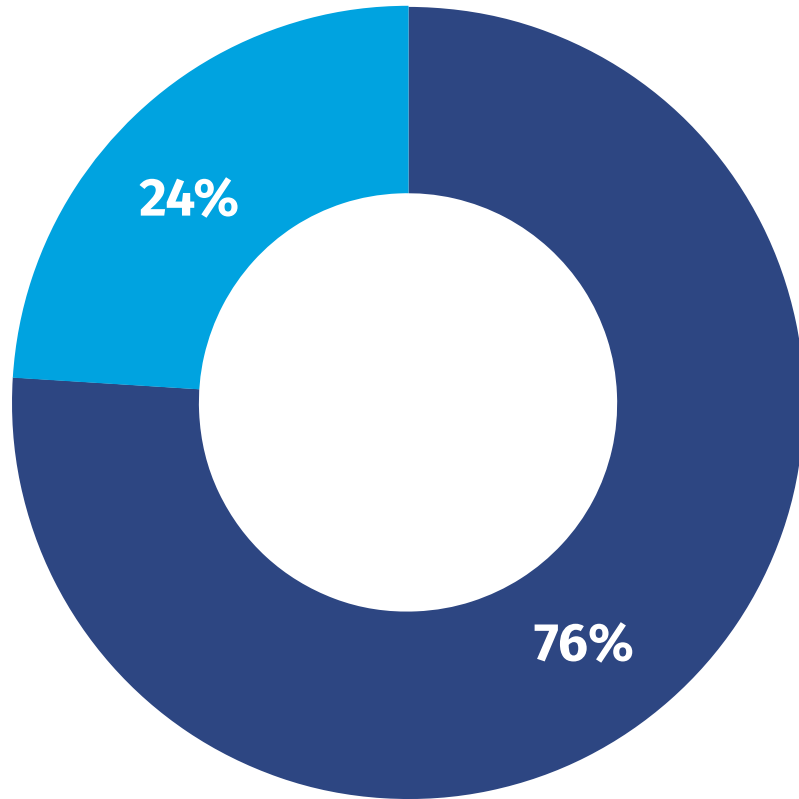
**24%** of young people say they spend most of their leisure time gaming (compared with 27% in 2023).



**21%** of young people spend most of their leisure time watching streamed content (e.g. Netflix, YouTube) (no change from 2023).



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCREENTIME



- Spend most of their free time on screen
- Spend most of their free time on non-screen based activities

**76%** of young people spend most of their free time on screens.



**Almost half (47%)** of young people say screen based activities make them feel happiest.



**Over 2/3 (67%)** of young people who cite gaming as their most time-consuming activity do this most days.



## Gender differences

**26%** of boys say they spend most of their leisure time gaming, making it their most time-consuming leisure activity.

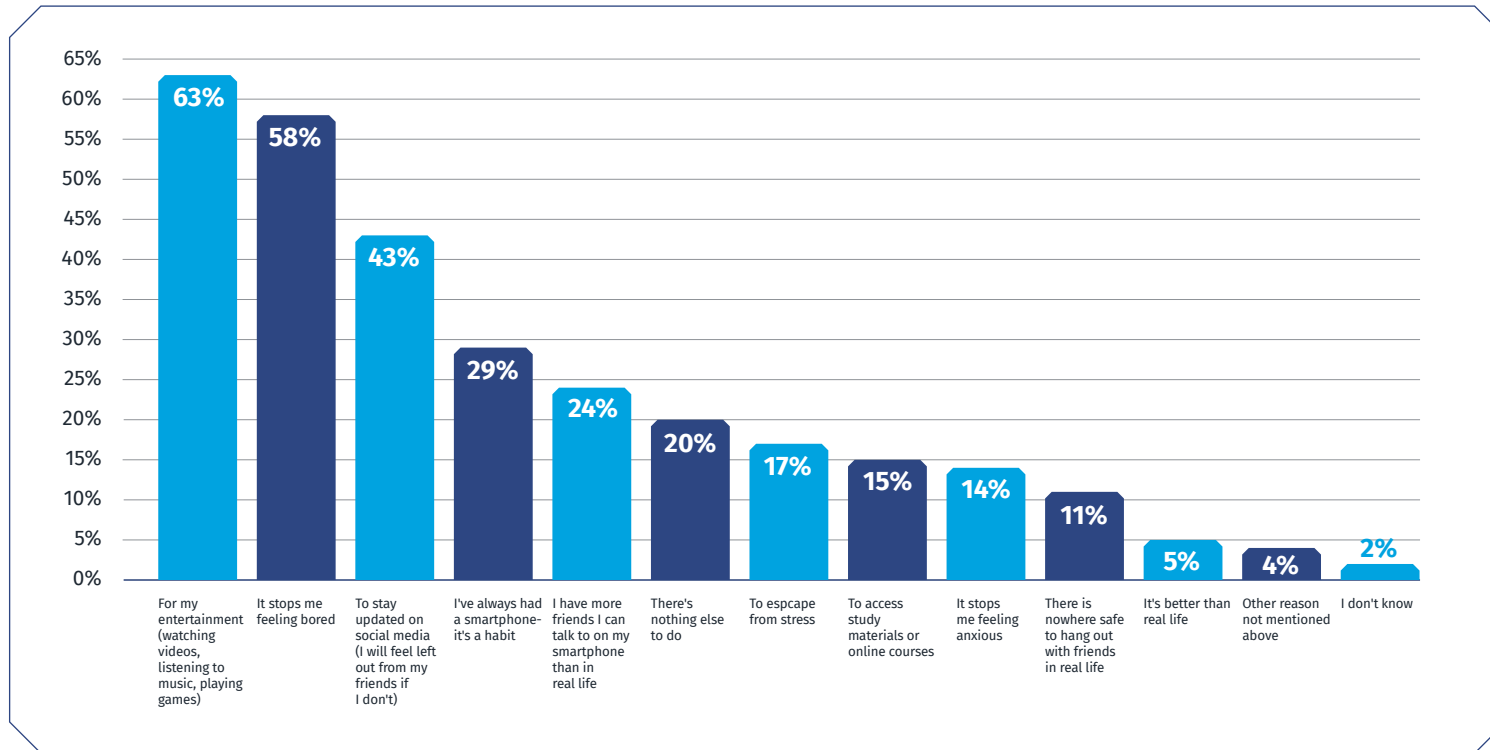


**27%** of girls say they spend most of their leisure time using their phone to communicate with friends, making it their most time consuming leisure activity.



# SPOTLIGHT ON SMARTPHONES

We asked young people that spend most of their free time on their phone their reasons for this.



**58%**

of young people who spend most of their free time on their phone do so because they are bored.



**43%**

of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone because they will feel left out from their friends if they don't.



**29%**

(almost a third) say they have always had a smartphone and use it so regularly out of habit.



**24%**

(almost a quarter) of young people say they have more friends they can talk to on their phone than they do in real life.



**11%**

of young people spend most of their free time on the phone because there is nowhere safe to hang out with friends in real life.



We asked 'What would help you to spend more time away from your smartphone?'

**46%** of young people said they do not know what would help them spend more time off their phone.



**12%** said more activities and hobbies to do.



**11%** said more opportunities to see their friends.



**3%** said their parents being stricter on phone use.



Young people's feelings about smartphone use:

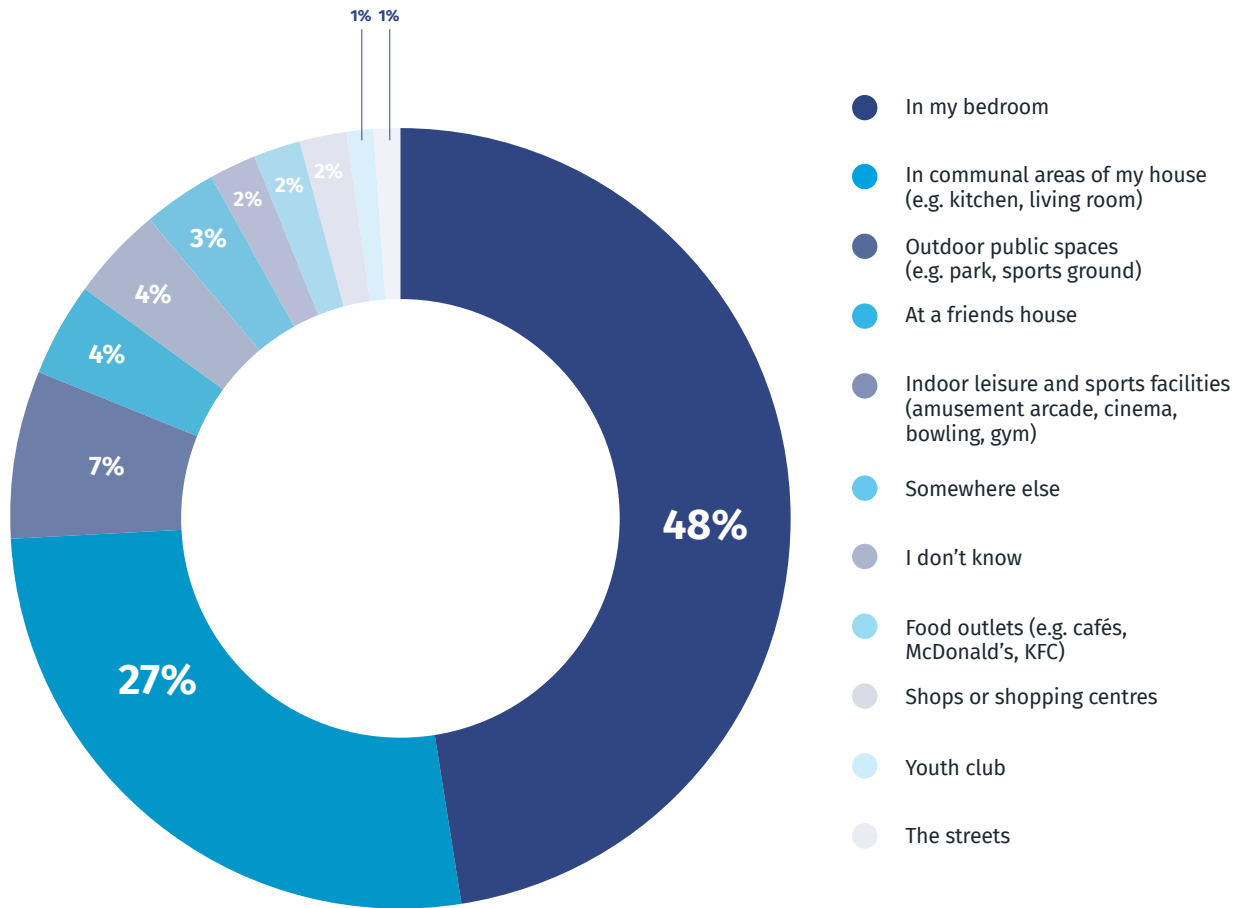
**52%** of the young people that spend most of their free time on their smartphone, wish they could spend less time on their phone



**15%** of young people said using their smartphone made them feel happier than any other free time activity.



# WHERE DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME?



**48%** of young people spend most of their free time in their bedrooms.



**75%** of young people spend most of their free time at home.



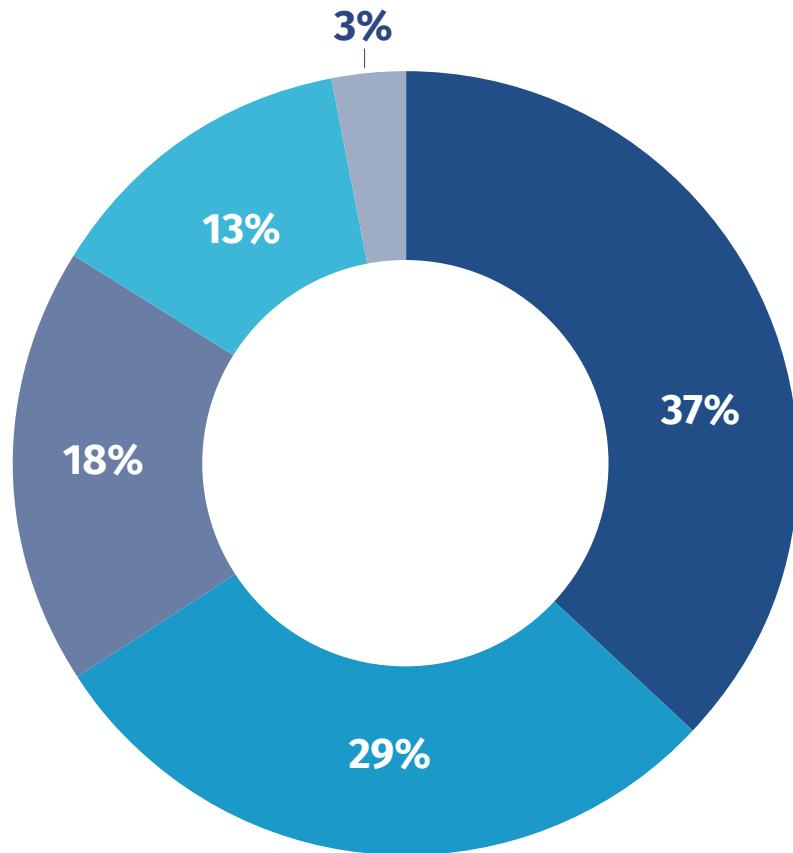
**4%** of young people spend most of their free time at friends' homes.



**1%** of young people spend most of their free time hanging out on the streets.



# WHO DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME WITH?



- I spend most of my free time with family/parents and/or carers
- I spend most of my free time online communicating with/talking to friends
- I spend most of my free time alone
- I spend most of my free time in person with my friends
- I don't know

Almost a fifth of young people **(18%)** spend most of their free time alone.



**13%** of young people spend most of their free time in person with their friends.



Almost a third of young people **(29%)** spend most of their free time online communicating with friends.



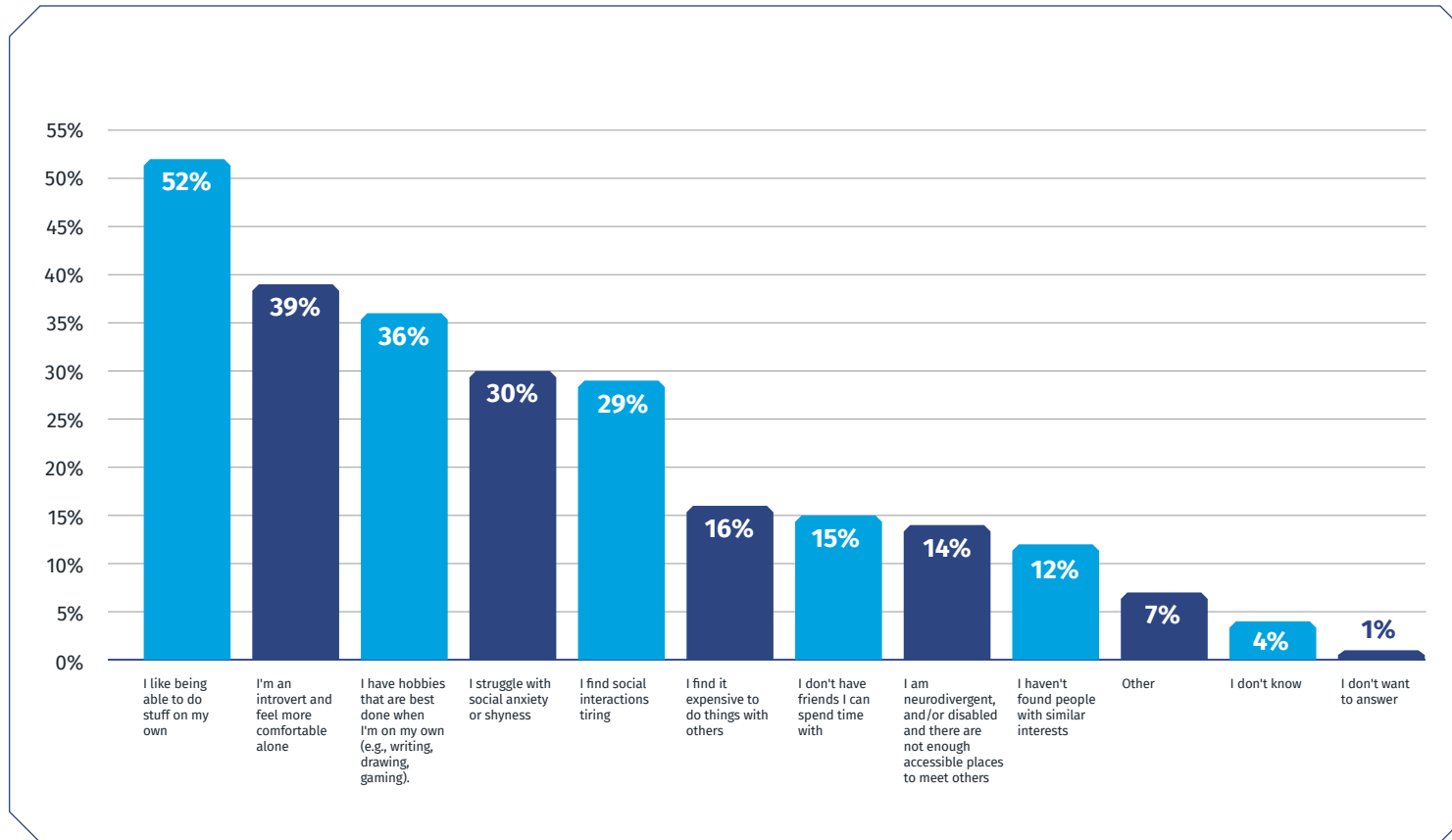
Young people who attend youth centres are more likely to say they spend most of their time with their friends in real life **(17%)** than those who don't **(12%)**.





# SPOTLIGHT ON LONELINESS

We asked the young people who spend most of their free time alone their reasons for this.



**44%** of young people reported high or very high feelings of loneliness.

**15%** of those young people who spend most of their free time alone cited not having friends as the reason for this.

**26%** of anxious young people cited loneliness as the reason for their anxiety.

The top 5 things reasons young people gave for spending most of their free time alone were:

Enjoying doing things alone **52%**.

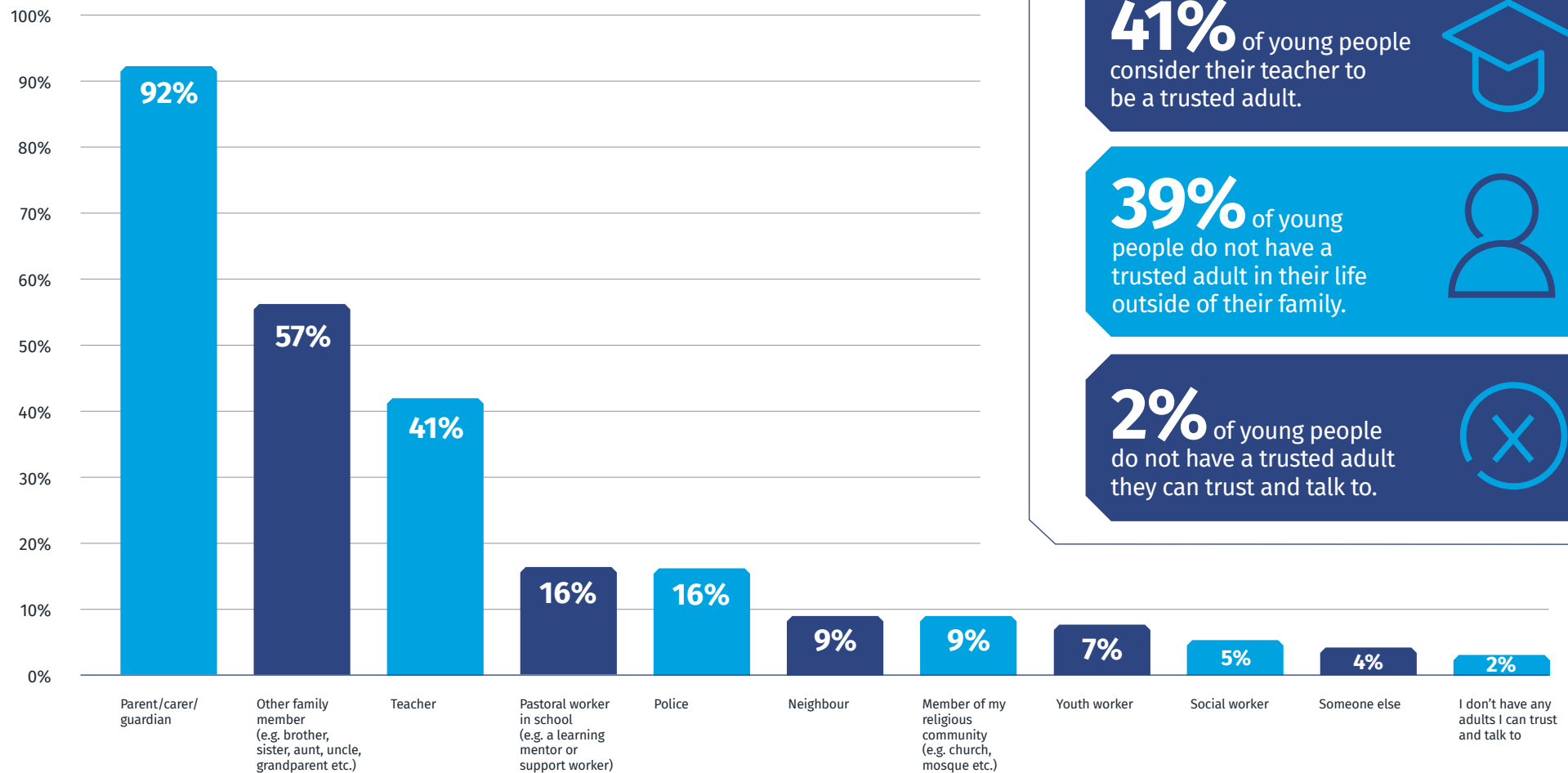
Being an introvert **39%**.

Taking part in solo hobbies **36%**.

Social anxiety **30%**.

Feeling drained by social interaction **29%**.

# WHO ARE YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRUSTED ADULTS?



**92%** of young people name their parents as people they feel they can trust and talk to.



**41%** of young people consider their teacher to be a trusted adult.



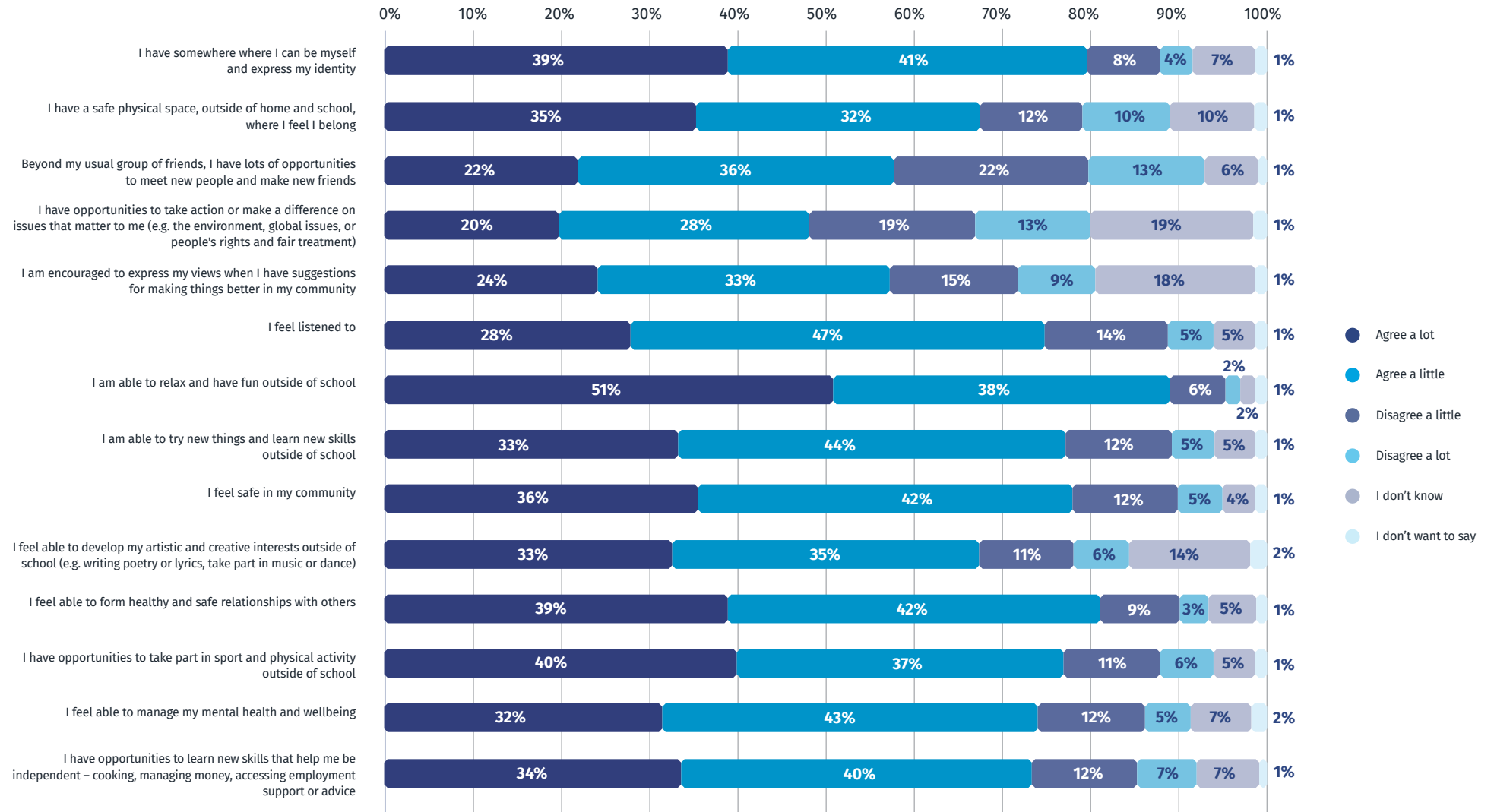
**39%** of young people do not have a trusted adult in their life outside of their family.



**2%** of young people do not have a trusted adult they can trust and talk to.





# OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE SCHOOL



Base: All England 11-18 year olds


We asked young people if they agree or disagree with several statements (outlined on page 19) about their lives outside of school. Their answers show that:


**89%** of young people feel able to relax and have fun outside of school. 


**21%** of young people say they do not have a safe space where they feel they belong. 


**81%** of young people feel able to form healthy relationships with others. 

**19%** of young people do not have the opportunity to learn the skills to prepare them for adulthood (e.g. cooking, managing money, accessing employment). 

**78%** of young people say they feel safe in their community. 

**17%** of young people do not feel able to manage their health and wellbeing. 

**35%** of young people do not have opportunities to meet new people or make friends beyond their social group outside of school. 

**17%** do not have opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity outside of school. 



### Youth clubs and opportunities

.....  
Young people that attend youth centres have greater levels of social connection.

.....  
**58%** of young people overall have lots of opportunity to meet new people and make new friends.

.....  
By contrast **83%** of young people that attend youth centres say they have lots of opportunities to make new friends.

# WELLBEING

We asked young people to rate their feelings against four wellbeing\* measures, ranking their feelings on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'.

## SATISFACTION

Overall how satisfied are you with your life right now?

**67%**

of young people reported high or very high levels of satisfaction with their life.

**12%**

reported low levels of satisfaction.

## HAPPINESS

How happy did you feel yesterday?

**70%**

of young people reported high or very high levels of happiness.

**10%**

reported low levels of happiness.

## LIFE IS WORTHWHILE

To what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

**66%**

of young people reported high or very high feeling that the things they do in their life are worthwhile.

**11%**

reported low feelings that the things they do in their life are worthwhile.

## ANXIETY

How anxious did you feel yesterday?

**51%**

reported high or very high feelings of anxiety (an increase from 2023).

**26%**

reported low feelings of anxiety.



**The top 5 causes of anxiety among young people are:**

Concerns about their future (university, college, jobs etc)

**52%**

What people think of them

**43%**

Exam pressure

**35%**

Issues with their friendship group

**28%**

Loneliness

**26%**

Other causes of anxiety include the cost-of-living (25%), social media (22%), and feeling unsafe where they live (10%).

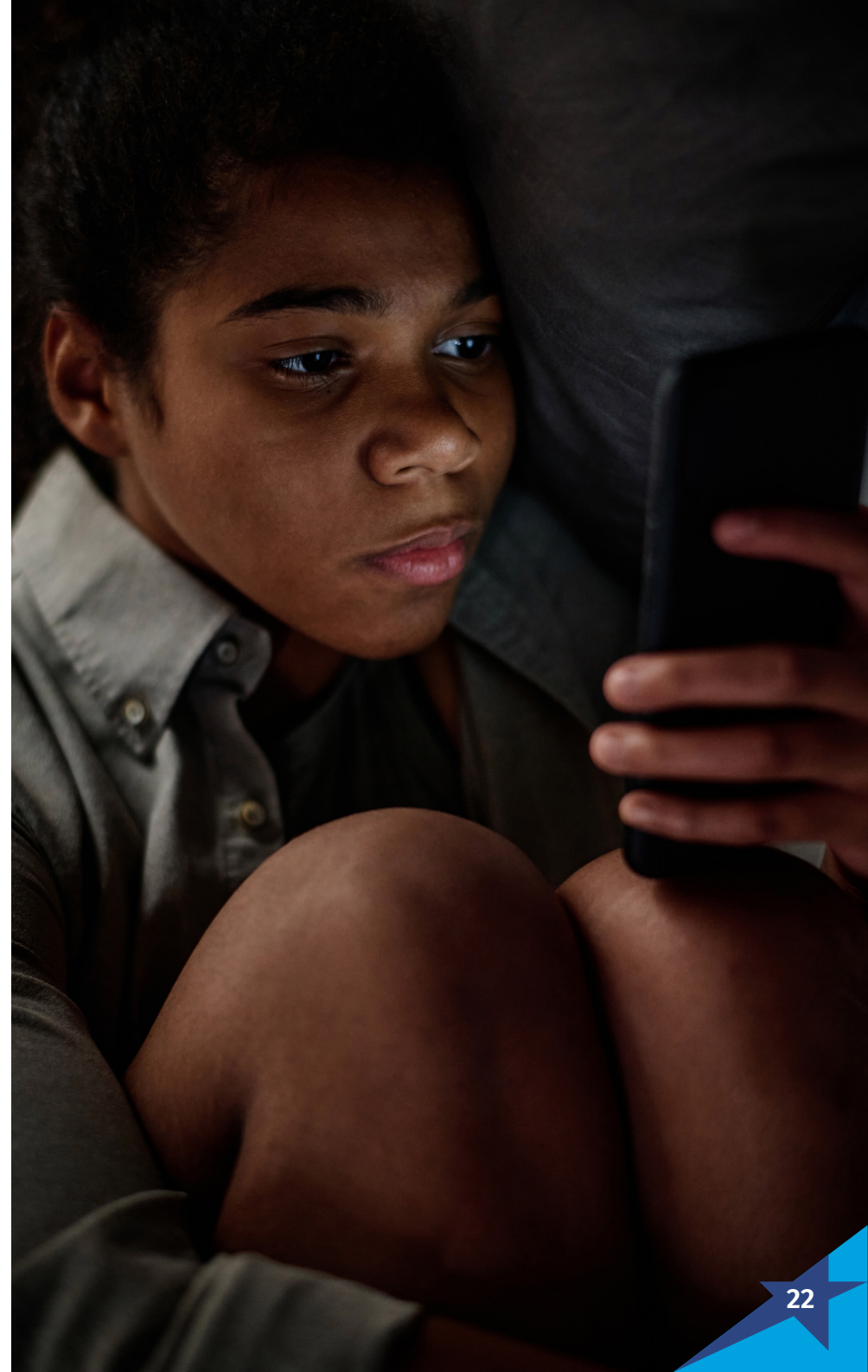


**29%**

of young people have had to stop out of school activities because of the cost-of-living.



*“ I suffer from anxiety so having youth workers and other young people like myself to talk to there really helps me. ”*

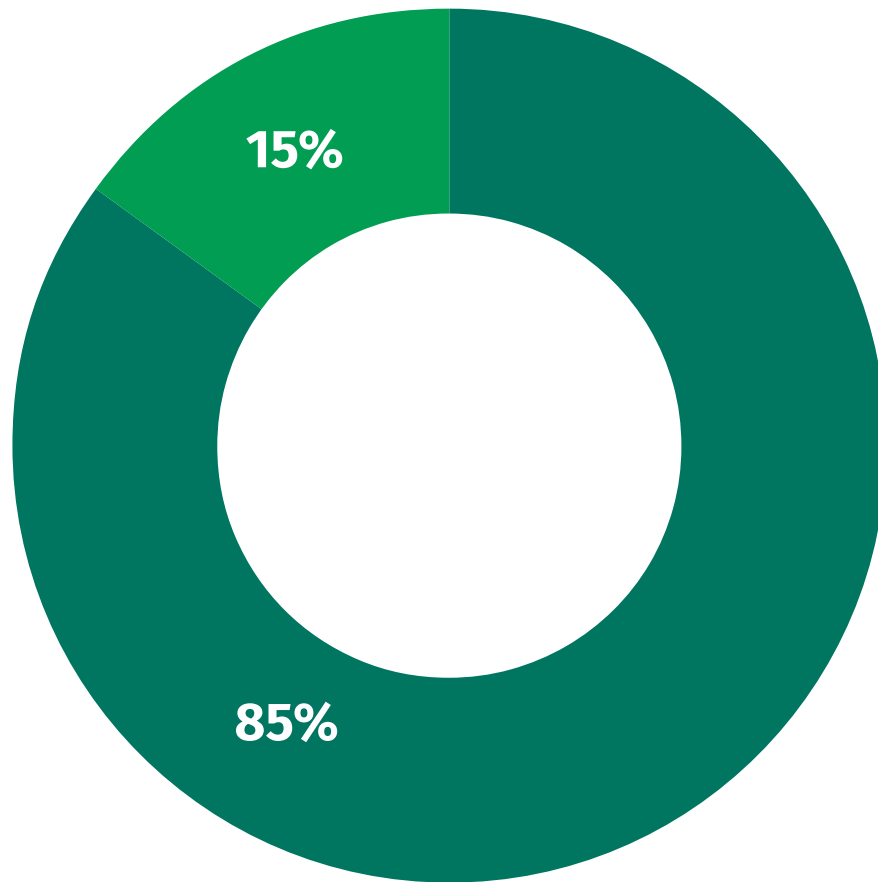


# PART 2 YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH SERVICES



# YOUTH CLUB EXPOSURE

We asked young people if they attend a youth centre.



- Yes, I do
- No, I do not

**85%** of young people do not attend a youth centre.



**45%** of young people do not know what youth work is when asked to define it.



**40%** of young people do not know what a youth worker is when asked to define it.



There has been a **6%** rise in the percentage of young people attending a youth centre (**15%** this year compared with **9%** last year).





# YOUTH CLUB IMPACTS

We asked young people that attend youth clubs about the difference it makes.

**93%** of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives.



**92%** of young people that attend a youth centre say it has offered them new experiences and opportunities.



**89%** of young people that attend a youth centre say it has given them new skills.

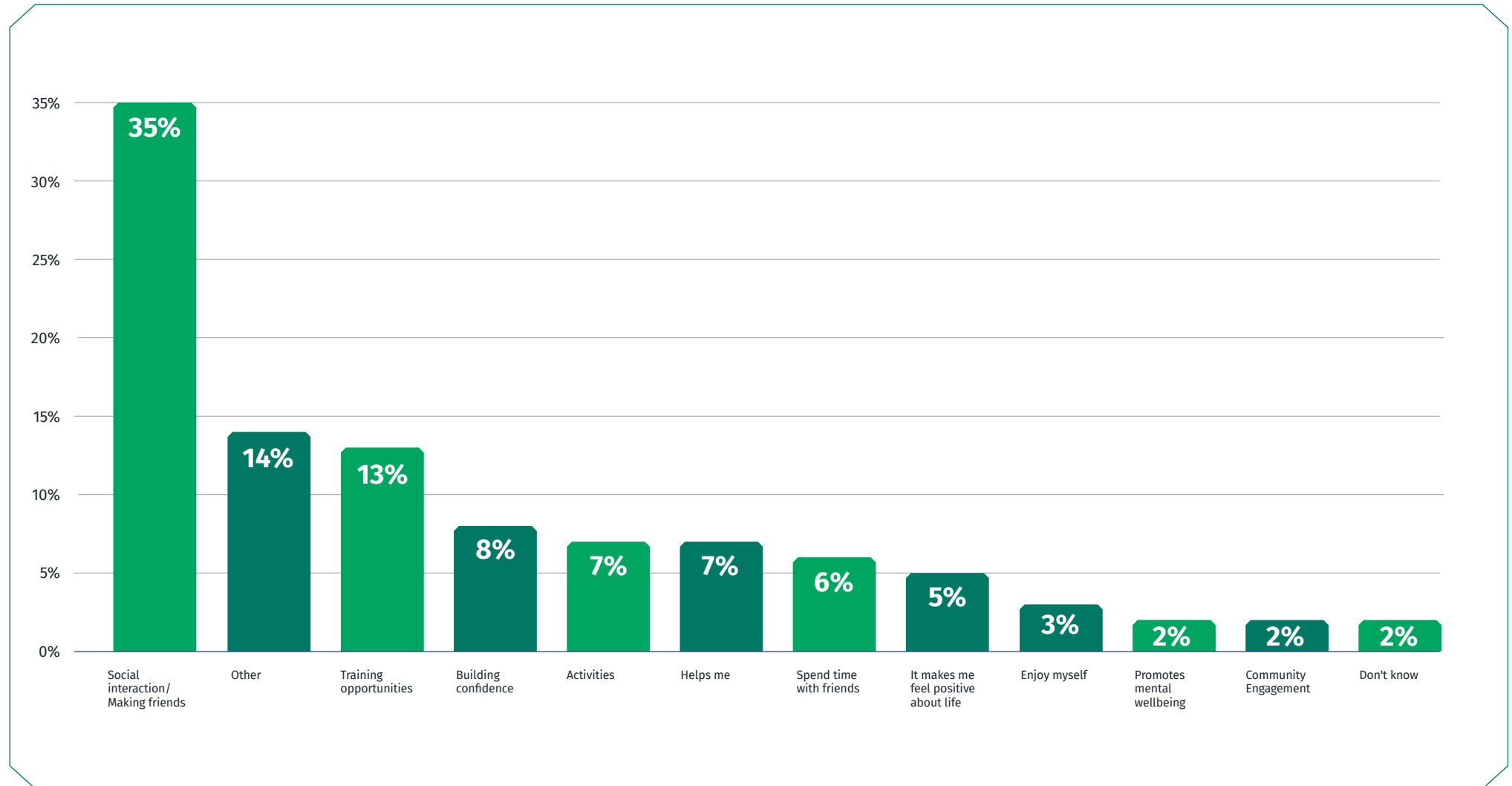


**83%** of young people that attend a youth centre say it has helped them overcome the difficulties they face.



# YOUTH CLUBS – POSITIVE DIFFERENCE

Of people who said that youth clubs have had a positive difference in their life, 35% of them said that making friends/social interaction was their reason for thinking this, making it the most popular reason.



# CONSIDERATIONS

What is important to young people when considering a youth centre?

## Top 3 considerations

**93%** say the friendliness of other young people.



**93%** of young people say it's the friendliness of staff.



**93%** of young people say feeling safe in the youth club.



“

*It has helped me become more sociable because I have engaged with more challenges, activities, and fun games so I've met more people and my confidence has been boosted.*”

## Other factors:

**90%** of young people cite being able to attend the youth centre on the days and times that work for them is important.

**88%** cite having friends to attend with.

**89%** cite the mix of activities on offer.

**86%** cite the range of facilities.

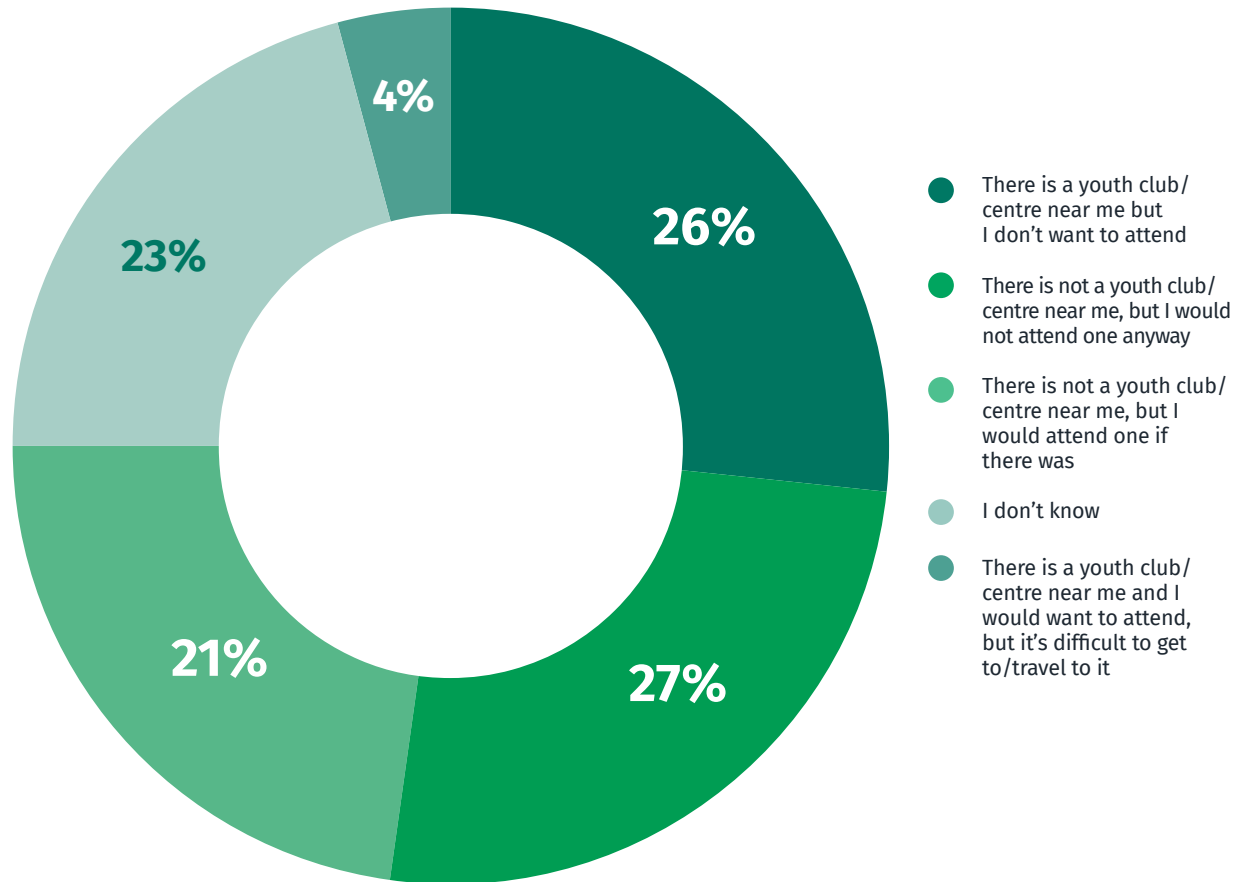
**77%** of young people cite the cost.

**63%** of young people cite what the building looks like.



# YOUTH CLUB PERCEPTIONS

We wanted to understand more about how young people that don't attend youth clubs perceive them.



## Key findings

Over a fifth (**21%**) of young people who don't currently go to a youth club would attend a youth centre if there was one near them.

Almost half of young people that don't currently attend (**48%**) say there isn't a youth club near them.

Over a quarter of young people that don't currently attend (**26%**) do not want to attend their local youth club.

“  
*I joined The Hive Youth Zone because there was nothing else for me to do. I felt shy, nervous and antisocial as I didn't know many people and it was a big building, but I felt welcomed by both the staff and other young people as soon as I walked in as they were all really nice and got me involved with different activities.*”

# ETHAN'S STORY

Ethan, a 15-year-old member at The Hive Youth Zone credits the Youth Zone with transforming his confidence and social skills.

“

*I joined the Youth Zone because I felt I needed some social interactions as I was socially anxious and didn't have many friends. I felt unconfident and anxious when I first joined. Now I feel more confident about myself - over the past few months my social skills and mental health have really improved.*

*I have more self-confidence and I have made more friends. The Art room activities are great and there is always a member of staff to talk to when I need to talk about something. I even had the chance to showcase my work at an art exhibition at The Hive. I wake up every day feeling more positive. My mental health has improved, and I am better at socialising and have made new friends.*

”



# ABOUT ONSIDE

**We are a national charity that believes every young person should have the opportunity to discover their passion and their purpose.**

To achieve this, we fund, build, launch and support a national network of state-of-the-art, multimillion-pound youth centres called Youth Zones in the UK's most economically disadvantaged areas.

Youth Zones are staffed by skilled and dedicated youth workers who truly believe in young people helping them see what they could achieve, and giving them the skills, confidence and ambition to go for it.

We believe passionately in the power of youth work to transform lives and provide young people with a breadth of opportunities to help them thrive, overcome challenges and transition positively into adulthood.



[www.onsideyouthzones.org](http://www.onsideyouthzones.org)

  
Here for young people



Registered Office: OnSide Youth Zones, Atria, Spa Road, Bolton, BL1 4AG | Registered Charity No: 1125893 | Company Registration No: 06591785