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Halton

A complementary local report to the Cheshire & Merseyside (C&M) Early Mental Health System Review -
“Seen, Heard, Supported? Young Voices, Local Services”

On behalf of:



Knowsley Council



WARRINGTON
Borough Council



WIRRAL



Sefton Council

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Foreword

What an incredible year of action, commissioned by the Cheshire & Merseyside Directors of Children's Services, the nine Local Authorities, and the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB. This work responds to a clear and urgent need to address rising demand in children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health. We must act earlier, more decisively, and together.

The Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise and Faith sector is a vital partner in this endeavour. I am proud that we committed funding to enable the sector not only to contribute to this work, but to lead it. The scale and depth of this review are impressive, with over 480 services mapped and the voices of more than 1,000 children and young people shaping its findings. The result is a report that is rich in insight, grounded in lived experience, and firmly focused on solutions.

The report is clear about gaps in current provision and the need to strengthen and grow models that are already working well. Above all, it reinforces the importance of supporting children and young people in the here and now. It will not surprise many of us that young people want different approaches, delivered in different ways and settings. What comes through overwhelmingly is their preference for non-clinical, flexible, and relational support rooted in their communities.

This is a powerful call to ensure that our collective investment is balanced across prevention, early intervention, and statutory services. Getting this balance right will reduce escalation, avoid unnecessary statutory involvement, and, quite simply, change lives.

This report would not have been possible without the commitment and trust of our voluntary sector partners. Their deep connections within communities enabled us to hear from children and young people whose voices too often go unheard within statutory systems. They helped surface services that are rarely captured within formal databases and were honest about the challenges they face: limited capacity, short-term funding cycles, and a lack of infrastructure to consistently evidence and share their impact. These realities are not peripheral to the findings; they are central to them.

What this report asks of us is simple, but not easy. It challenges us to act as one system across Cheshire & Merseyside so that every child and young person, wherever they live and whenever they need help, can access timely, early support without barriers or delay. It reinforces the value of local, accessible spaces and the importance of maximising the community assets we already have.

This is a timely and important report. Need is rising, the evidence is clear, and national policy is increasingly aligned towards prevention and early intervention. As system leaders, we are called to do more and to do better.



Crucially, this report does not just describe the challenge; it brings insight from children and young people themselves, alongside tangible, proven models that already exist and work. It invites us to work together, at every level, to meet the needs and expectations of our young citizens.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the children and young people who shared their experiences, insights, and hopes through this work. Many spoke openly about difficult moments in their lives, and their honesty and generosity have shaped this report in powerful and meaningful ways. Their voices sit at the heart of these findings and must continue to inform how we design and deliver support.

I am also grateful to all partners who contributed their time, expertise, and challenge throughout the process. A big thank you to Nasima Patel and the team for making this happen with such professionalism and passion, and special thanks to the steering group:

- Kevin Bradburne – Director of Youth Federation
- Dave Packwood - VCSFE Children and Young People Network Manager (Cheshire & Merseyside)
- Monique Collier - Chief Executive Officer for YPAS
- Val O'Donnell – Director of Services for YPAS
- Anne-Marie Thornburn – NHS Transforming Care CYP Programme Lead
- Lisa Carden Doorey – Head of Sector Development for Community & Voluntary Services Cheshire East
- Rachel Smethurst, Charlotte Hall & Louise Houghton – NHS Young Adults Mental Health group

Kind regards,

Mark Palethorpe

Chief Executive, St Helens Borough Council
Chair of Cheshire and Merseyside DCS Forum
Children's Lead for the CEX LCRCA (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority)



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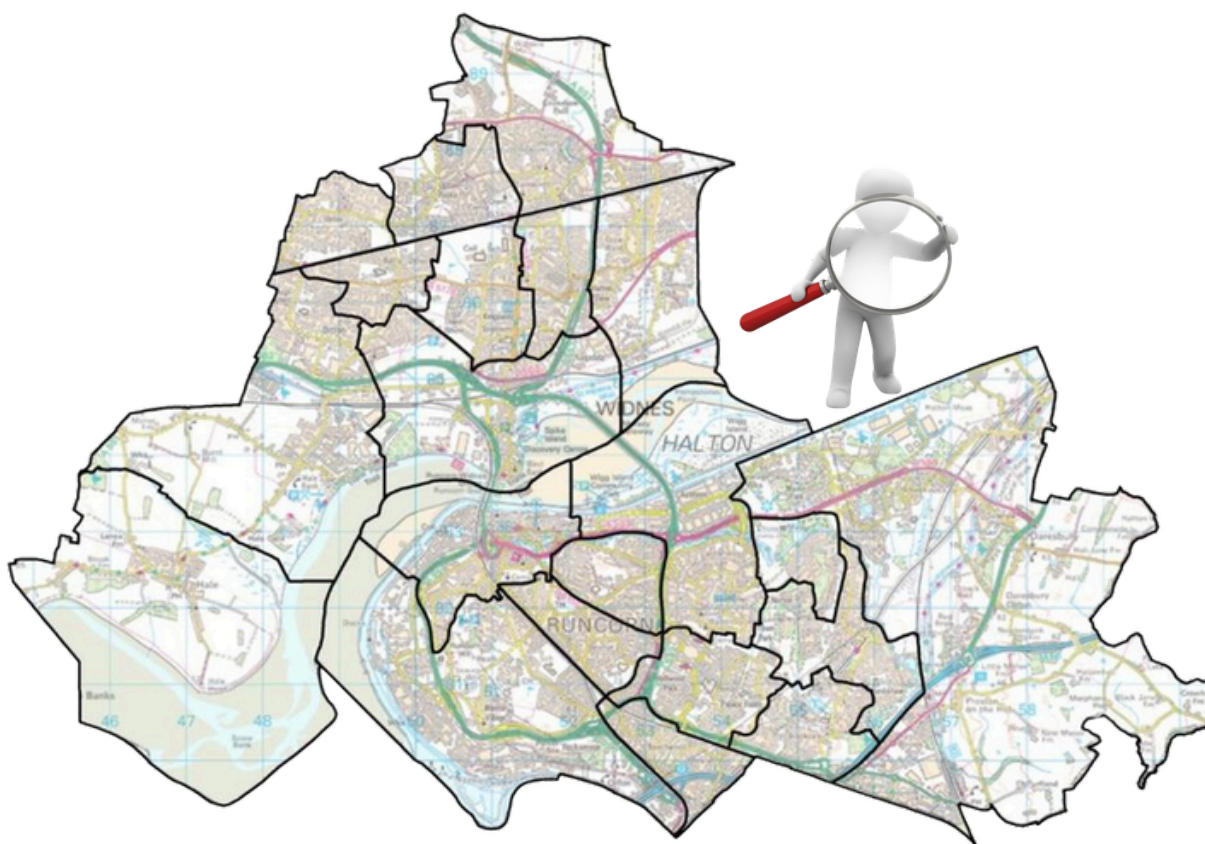


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Executive Summary

This report has been developed as a complementary Halton place-based analysis to the wider Cheshire & Merseyside Early Mental Health System Review. It brings together system mapping, partner insight and, critically, the voices of children and young people (CYP) to assess how well early emotional wellbeing and mental health support meets local need.

Why this review matters

Children and young people in Halton are experiencing rising levels of emotional distress, shaped by deprivation, inequality and wider social pressures. Local evidence highlights increasing complexity of need, alongside variation in access across communities.

While a broad and evolving system of support exists across statutory, education and VCSFE sectors, young people do not consistently experience this as visible, accessible or easy to navigate. Many describe services as difficult to find, variable in quality and not always available at the right time. Waiting times, thresholds and fragmented pathways can mean support is experienced as reactive rather than preventative.

Transitions, particularly into adulthood, remain a key gap, with many young people experiencing reduced continuity and uncertainty about where to go.

What we did

The review draws on a mixed-methods approach, including:

- Mapping a wide range of emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across Halton
- Direct engagement with 46+ children and young people, including survey responses and Youth Council input
- Input from VCSFE organisations, schools, Family Hubs and system partners
- Analysis of local needs data, policy and best practice

This approach ensures findings reflect both system insight and lived experience.

What young people told us

Young people's feedback was clear and consistent:

- Awareness of support is low, with no clear or visible route into services
- Experiences are mixed, with some positive support but others describing it as impersonal or ineffective
- Support is often not available when it is needed, particularly after school and at weekends
- Relationships, trust and feeling understood are the most important factors
- Some young people do not access support at all, despite recognising need
-

Young people also highlighted what works: trusted relationships, informal and activity-based support, and safe, familiar environments such as schools, home and community settings.



The current system

Halton has strong foundations. These include a committed VCSFE and youth work sector, extensive outreach delivery, and a range of relational, community-based and activity-focused provision. There are also clear strengths in family support, SEND provision and early help approaches.

However, the system is not yet experienced as coherent or consistently accessible. Key challenges include:

- A gap between available provision and young people's awareness or ability to navigate it
- Uneven access across neighbourhoods, influenced by transport, infrastructure and local reach
- Limited visibility, with fragmented information and no clear "front door"
- Capacity pressures and reliance on short-term funding
- Fragmented provision and pathways for 18–25 year olds

What must change

The evidence points to a clear set of priorities for improvement:

- Create a clear, youth-friendly "front door" to improve visibility and navigation
- Expand evening and weekend provision to better reflect when support is needed
- Strengthen early help and prevention, ensuring support is available before crisis
- Improve coordination of outreach and neighbourhood-based provision
- Address inequalities in access across communities
- Develop coherent pathways, particularly for 16–25 year olds
- Ensure no young person is left without support while waiting

A call to action

Halton has strong partnerships, community assets and a clear understanding of what young people need. The challenge now is not to redesign the system, but to connect, coordinate and sustain what already works well.

By strengthening visibility, aligning provision more closely with young people's lives, and prioritising relationships and continuity, there is a clear opportunity to create a more joined-up, preventative system.

The ambition is a system where every child and young person knows where to go, can access support at the right time, and receives help that is consistent, meaningful and built around their everyday experiences.



Introduction

Children and young people's (CYP) mental health remains one of the most urgent and widely recognised challenges nationally, and Halton reflects this clearly. Emotional wellbeing locally is shaped by a range of interconnected factors, including deprivation, inequality, housing, education and adverse childhood experiences. Together, these contribute to rising levels of emotional distress, increasing complexity of need and unequal access to support.

In Halton, this picture is further intensified by higher levels of poverty, greater prevalence of SEND and social care involvement, and sustained demand across health and early help systems. There is also significant variation between neighbourhoods, with some communities experiencing both higher levels of need and more limited access to provision.



Halton Public Health documents including JSNA can be accessed here

Halton has a broad and evolving early help offer, spanning statutory and NHS services, school-based provision, Family Hubs, digital platforms and a strong voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCSFE) sector. The VCSFE sector plays a particularly important role in delivering flexible, community-based and relational support, often through youth work, outreach and activity-based provision. The borough also demonstrates strong partnership working, with a growing emphasis on integration, early intervention and place-based approaches that bring together education, health, social care and community services.

Despite these strengths, the system continues to face challenges around visibility, access, capacity and coordination. Many young people report not knowing where to go for support or finding services difficult to navigate. Waiting times, threshold-based access and short-term interventions can limit continuity of care, while support is not always available when it is most needed, particularly outside school hours. Transitions between services, especially into adulthood, remain a key pressure point, with some young people experiencing fragmentation or uncertainty about where they fit within the system. These challenges can be more pronounced for neurodivergent young people and those experiencing multiple or complex forms of need.

This report builds on local and regional work by mapping provision across Halton and examining how well current services align with the needs and experiences of children and young people. By combining system mapping, local intelligence and direct engagement with young people, it provides an evidence-based foundation to support the continued development of a more visible, connected and equitable early help system. This approach aligns with national policy direction and the ambitions of the Cheshire & Merseyside Mental Health Plan, alongside local priorities focused on prevention, early intervention and improving outcomes for children, young people and families.



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Our ambition is to move towards a system where support is clearly visible, better connected and easier to access, ensuring that children and young people can find help when they need it, in places that feel safe, familiar and relevant to their everyday lives.

A young person friendly version of this report will be available alongside the sub-regional Cheshire & Merseyside report

Approach

This report examines emotional wellbeing and early mental health support for children and young people (CYP) aged 5–25. This age range was selected to address the well-recognised challenges associated with transitions between children’s and adult services, and to complement existing work undertaken in early years provision, which focused on mapping provision for children aged 0–5. Throughout this report, references to CYP relate specifically to this 5–25 cohort, and “young adults” refers to those aged 16–25.

The Halton locality analysis forms part of the wider Cheshire & Merseyside Early Mental Health System Review and follows the same mixed methods framework outlined in the main report. The aim is to develop a detailed understanding of emotional wellbeing provision in Halton, with a focus on accessibility, visibility, timing and lived experience

The work included:

- Mapping and review of local provision, drawing on information from statutory services, VCSFE organisations, schools, Family Hubs and community providers. This included analysis of delivery models, access routes, age ranges, outreach activity, digital provision, waiting times, operating hours and funding stability. The mapping reflects a diverse and community-based system, including universal services (e.g. Family Hubs, 0–19 health), youth work, therapeutic provision, SEND support, substance misuse services, domestic abuse services, identity-specific provision and crisis pathways.
- Direct engagement with CYP, including survey responses from 46 children and young people across Halton, alongside input from the Halton Youth Council and wider participation through schools, youth groups and community organisations. While not fully representative, this dataset provides consistent and meaningful insight into lived experience, including how young people access support, their preferences and the barriers they face. Responses were analysed thematically and supported by direct quotations.
- Targeted inclusion of groups facing additional barriers, including neurodivergent young people, those with disabilities, young carers, LGBTQ+ young people, care-experienced young people and those less likely to engage with formal services. Engagement was supported through trusted relationships with local VCSFE organisations to ensure participation was inclusive and reflective of more vulnerable groups within Halton.



- Desk-based analysis of need, policy and best practice, drawing on evidence including the Halton Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP), Public Health intelligence and wider system insight. This was aligned with national and regional frameworks, including the NHS 0–25 pathway, iTHRIVE, the National Youth Strategy and Young Futures guidance.

This approach prioritised co-production, inclusion and practical system insight, ensuring that findings reflect both lived experience and service delivery within a mixed, community-based system. Together, these methods provide a robust, evidence-informed understanding of the Halton landscape.

Although the work initially focused on physical provision, the scope was broadened to include outreach, community-based, home-based and digital support. This reflects how children and young people in Halton access support in practice—through schools, Family Hubs, neighbourhood settings, outreach and online platforms—rather than through a single, linear pathway.

Terminology within early mental health provision is often used inconsistently. For the purposes of this report:

- A youth hub refers to a community-based space providing open access activities, advice and early emotional wellbeing support without referral or thresholds
- Early mental health support refers to support for mild to moderate needs, aligned to “Getting Advice” and “Getting Help” within iTHRIVE
- CYP pathways are not linear; young people may access multiple services simultaneously or move between levels of need, requiring flexible and joined-up responses
- Youth hubs are distinct from Family Hubs but are considered part of a connected early help system alongside schools and community services

Overall, this methodology captures how early help is both delivered and experienced in Halton, providing a clear and reliable evidence base for understanding system strengths and identifying areas for development.



i-THRIVE Framework



Children and Young People's Voice

Young people in Halton shared a clear and consistent message: support is important, but it is not always easy to find, access or experience in ways that meet their needs. Many described uncertainty about where to go, limited awareness of available services, and challenges accessing support at the right time.

Across responses, young people emphasised the importance of being listened to, feeling understood and having support that fits into their everyday lives. Positive experiences were typically relational and flexible, while less helpful experiences felt impersonal, inconsistent or difficult to engage with.

While some young people described positive experiences, there is also a clear message that support does not always meet expectations and, in some cases, discourages further help-seeking.

Awareness and routes into support are mixed

Young people described a range of ways they might seek help, including school, home, online spaces, friends and youth services. However, there is no single clear or consistent pathway into support.

Schools often act as a primary access point, particularly through teachers or pastoral support. Others rely more heavily on informal networks such as family and friends, with some preferring to talk to people their own age rather than professionals. Online options were also identified, but were generally seen as secondary rather than a preferred first step.

At the same time, a number of young people reported not accessing support at all, being unsure where to go, or feeling they would not seek help. Responses such as “I don’t know” or “I wouldn’t go” highlight low confidence in navigating support.

This suggests that access is often dependent on existing relationships rather than a clear and visible system, with awareness, confidence and perceived relevance remaining key barriers.



Experiences of support are inconsistent

Young people's experiences of support vary considerably, ranging from very positive to unhelpful or ineffective.

Positive experiences were linked to feeling understood, being able to talk openly and receiving support that made a difference

However, others described support as impersonal, inconsistent or lacking meaningful engagement.

Common issues included:

- Feeling unheard or not taken seriously
- Limited follow-up or continuity
- Support being available but not helpful

Some young people also highlighted that support can feel overly structured or generic, with a preference for more personalised, flexible and ongoing conversations.

Some young people also described unmet need, including not receiving support despite asking for help or feeling unsure how to access services. In some cases, negative experiences reduced confidence in seeking help again.

"They helped me feel better"

"I felt understood"

"It was available... but it didn't help."

"Feels like they don't care."

"Haven't had support but I think I need it."

Timing of support is a key gap

Young people were clear that support is not always available when it is most needed.

Key times of need include:

- After school
- Evenings
- Weekends
- Periods of increased pressure, such as exams

While some evening and weekend provision exists, it is often limited to specific times or locations. This means young people must adapt to service availability, rather than services aligning with real-life need.

Many described how pressures build during the day, particularly in school, and are only processed later. In some cases, this led to feelings becoming overwhelming without accessible support at the right time



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Relationships and feeling understood matter most

Across all responses, the quality of relationships was the strongest factor influencing whether support was helpful.

Young people valued support where they felt:

- Genuinely listened to
- Understood as individuals
- Able to speak openly without judgement

"They understood me on a personal level."

Support from trusted individuals, including friends, family members and relatable adults, was often seen as most effective.

In contrast, negative experiences were associated with feeling dismissed, unable to connect, or not being taken seriously. Young people also highlighted the importance of choice, including who they speak to and how support is delivered.

The effectiveness of support is strongly influenced by the young person's relationship with the individual delivering it, not simply the availability of the service.

What young people in Halton told us most clearly

We want to...

- "Be listened to and understood"
- "Know where to go for support"
- "Get help when we actually need it"
- "Have someone we trust to talk to"
- "Access support in places that feel safe and familiar"
- "Have consistent support, not just one-off sessions"



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Strengths

Despite these challenges, young people described positive experiences where support was relational, consistent and easy to access. Trusted relationships with school staff, youth workers and family members were particularly valued, alongside informal environments where young people felt comfortable talking openly.

What Young People Want More Of

Young people in Halton were clear about how support could be improved. Key priorities include:

More personalised and meaningful support

Support that feels tailored, with genuine conversations and a clear sense that professionals care and listen.

Longer and more consistent support

More frequent and sustained engagement, rather than short-term or one-off interactions.

Support at the right time

Greater availability outside school hours, particularly after school, in the evenings and at weekends.

Accessible, informal spaces

Safe, welcoming environments where young people can talk, spend time with others and take part in activities. These should feel relaxed and youth-friendly rather than formal or clinical.

Choice and flexibility

Greater ability to choose who to talk to (adult, peer or both) and where support takes place (home, school, online or community settings).

These priorities strongly align with the factors outlined in the table on the next page, which summarises what young people identify as helpful and unhelpful in practice.



What CYP in Halton Say Helps vs. Doesn't Help

What makes support feel helpful	What makes support feel unhelpful
Feeling listened to, understood and able to talk openly about feelings	Feeling unheard, dismissed or not taken seriously
Support that helps them feel better, builds confidence or improves how they cope	Support that feels ineffective, unhelpful or doesn't make a difference
Being able to speak honestly and "voice my feelings and thoughts" without fear of judgement	Support that feels impersonal, rushed or lacks meaningful engagement
Trusted relationships with friends, family, youth workers or familiar and consistent adults	Not having anyone to talk to, or not accessing support at all despite needing it
Having a choice of who to talk to (adult, peer or both) and feeling comfortable with them	Not feeling comfortable with the person providing support or being unable to choose
Support in familiar, safe environments such as home, school or community settings	Not knowing where to go, how to access support, or feeling that services are "not for them"
Regular check-ins and opportunities for ongoing, consistent support	Sessions that are too infrequent, short, inconsistent or end too quickly
Advice, reassurance and emotional support that feels relevant, personalised and genuine	Generic or "one size fits all" approaches that don't reflect individual needs or experiences
Activity-based and informal environments (e.g. sports, art, spending time with friends) that make it easier to open up	Lack of engaging, youth-friendly approaches, making it harder to connect or feel comfortable
Safe, relaxed and welcoming spaces where young people can talk, spend time and feel at ease	Environments that feel uncomfortable, intimidating, overly formal or clinical
Flexible support available at times that reflect real needs (e.g. after school, evenings, weekends)	Support only available at limited times that don't match when help is needed most
Opportunities to talk about feelings early, before they escalate	Needing help but not receiving it, or feeling unsure, unable or unwilling to access support



How Young People Hear About Services

Access to support is primarily shaped by immediate networks.

Young people most commonly identified:

- Schools
- Family members
- Friends
- Youth workers or community settings

**"I just need help
with my feelings."**

While these routes work well for some, they highlight a gap for those who are less connected to these networks. There is limited evidence of wider awareness routes, suggesting that many services remain difficult to find or understand.

This reinforces the need for clearer, more visible and youth-friendly promotion of services in the spaces young people already use.

Service Design: What Works Best

Overall, young people favour support that is informal, flexible and embedded within their everyday environments, such as schools, homes and community settings. What matters most is not the type of service, but how it feels, support is most effective when it is accessible, relational and relevant to their lives.

What Young People Want Us to Know

Young people want support that is easy to find, available at the right time and delivered by people who listen and understand. Where this is not in place, confidence in seeking help can reduce.

Age-Related Differences

While many themes were consistent across age groups, some differences in experience and preference were evident.

Younger children (10–13) were more likely to value support from trusted adults and familiar environments, particularly home and school. They responded strongly to play-based, creative and social activities, often preferring calm and predictable settings.

Young people aged 14–16 showed a broader range of preferences, including school-based, home and online support. This group placed greater emphasis on independence, choice and flexibility, particularly in who they speak to and how support is delivered. They were also more likely to report mixed or negative experiences, and uncertainty about where to access appropriate support as they get older.

Despite these differences, the overall message is consistent: young people in Halton want support that is accessible, flexible and built around trusted relationships, in environments where they feel safe and able to be themselves.



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Current Landscape

Halton has a broad and developing early help landscape for emotional wellbeing and early mental health, demonstrating a clear commitment to early support. Support is delivered through a mix of statutory services, VCSFE provision, school-based support and community organisations; however, it is not yet experienced by young people as a coherent or consistently accessible system.

Young people highlighted that support within schools is not always experienced as consistent or embedded. In some cases, it is dependent on individual staff or delivered through one-off sessions, rather than forming part of everyday school life. This suggests an opportunity to strengthen more integrated, visible and ongoing support within educational settings.

The local offer is diverse, spanning early years through to young adulthood (0–25). It includes targeted youth work, therapeutic provision, bereavement support, substance misuse services, digital platforms and employability-focused programmes.

A key strength of the Halton system is its emphasis on youth work, outreach and activity-based engagement, particularly through VCSFE providers.

Organisations deliver a wide range of programmes, including detached youth work, SEND groups, crime prevention initiatives and youth clubs operating across neighbourhoods and evenings. These approaches play an important role in engaging young people who may not access formal services and in building trusted, relationship-based support within communities.

There is also evidence of integrated, whole-family and early help approaches. These models provide coordinated support across education, social care and health systems and reflect a strong local focus on early intervention and supporting families experiencing multiple challenges.

However, a defining feature of the Halton system is the gap between the range of provision available and how easily it can be accessed and navigated. While many services exist, information is not always clear, up to date or easy to find. Feedback highlights challenges in navigating digital platforms and local directories, with services spread across multiple systems.



As a result, access is often dependent on existing relationships with schools, professionals or community organisations, rather than through a clear and visible “front door”. This can lead to uncertainty about where to go for help and contributes to a system that feels fragmented from a young person’s perspective.

In practice, availability does not always translate into accessibility. Even where services exist locally, factors such as limited session times, referral routes, eligibility criteria and awareness can prevent young people from accessing support when they need it.

The system is delivered through a complex mix of providers, funding streams and delivery models, including commissioned services, grant-funded VCSFE provision and pilot programmes. While there are strong examples of partnership working, this complexity can lead to variation, duplication and gaps, making it harder for young people to experience support as joined-up and consistent.

However, Halton is also seeing significant system development and investment, including the planned Youth hub and the wider Well Runcorn programme. These aim to provide integrated, community-based spaces combining wellbeing, education, employability and skills development, and offer an important opportunity to strengthen visibility and access if fully aligned with wider provision and young people’s needs.

The system continues to operate within a context of high demand and wider socioeconomic pressures. These contribute to sustained pressure on services, many of which are already operating at or beyond capacity.

Many services rely on short-term or project-based funding, particularly within the VCSFE sector. This can affect sustainability, consistency and long-term planning, and may limit continuity of relationships and the ability to provide longer-term support.

Overall, this creates a system where support is available but not always experienced as reliable or easy to use. While provision exists across Halton, challenges in visibility, access and coordination mean that it is not yet consistently experienced by young people as a joined-up and dependable system



Location

Access to provision is not evenly distributed, with some communities having more consistent youth and wellbeing activity than others. This creates variation in how easily young people can engage with support depending on where they live.

Provision is typically delivered through community venues, youth settings and outreach rather than large centralised hubs. Services such as youth clubs and detached outreach provide localised access, helping to reduce barriers related to transport, cost and stigma.

Young people show a strong preference for accessing support within their local communities. However, transport, cost and awareness remain barriers to accessing provision further afield. This is compounded by wider inequalities between neighbourhoods, with some areas experiencing both higher levels of need and fewer accessible services.

This reinforces the importance of maintaining and expanding neighbourhood based provision and outreach to improve equity of access across Halton

Age Ranges Covered

Provision in Halton spans ages 5–25, but the experience of support varies across life stages.

5–10 Support is delivered primarily through Family Hubs, early years services and SEND pathways. These play a key role in early intervention but are typically accessed through parents or professionals and are less visible to children themselves.

11–17 is the strongest area of provision, with a wide mix of school-based support, youth work, community programmes and targeted services. Youth organisations play a key role in engaging this group through informal, relationship-based approaches. Schools also remain a central access point, although they are under increasing pressure to meet demand.

18–25 provision becomes more limited and fragmented. While some services extend to 25 many offers end earlier or are targeted at specific groups. As a result, young people can experience reduced continuity and fewer clear pathways, with some describing uncertainty about where they fit as they move into adulthood.



Access and Holding Support

Services in Halton operate across a mix of access models, including open access, self-referral, professional referral and eligibility-based provision.

Some services, such as youth work, outreach and digital platforms, offer immediate or flexible access. However, more specialist or therapeutic support often involves referral processes, thresholds and waiting times.

There are examples of good practice in holding support, including:

- Drop-in models
- Crisis cafés and some out-of-hours provision
- Ongoing engagement through youth work and community provision

However, these approaches are not consistently embedded across the system. As a result, young people may experience gaps in support while waiting, particularly where services are capacity limited or threshold-based.

This is further compounded by a mismatch between service availability and when support is needed most, particularly during evenings, weekends and periods of increased pressure.

There is therefore a clear opportunity to strengthen consistent “while you wait” support and improve coordination across services, ensuring young people are not left without contact.

Outreach Provision

Outreach is a central component of the Halton system, particularly through youth work and VCSFE delivery. This includes detached youth work, mobile provision and delivery in informal community settings.

Organisations provide structured outreach activity across neighbourhoods, including evening provision. These approaches are particularly effective in engaging young people who may not access formal services and in building trusted relationships.

However, provision can vary depending on funding and capacity, and is not always coordinated at a system level. There is an opportunity to strengthen:

- Coordination between providers
- Coverage across all neighbourhoods
- Pathways from outreach into sustained support



Visibility of Services and Partnership Working

A key challenge in Halton is the visibility and accessibility of services, rather than a lack of provision. Services are currently promoted through a mix of:

- Schools and education settings
- Community networks and youth services
- Digital platforms and local authority websites
- Word of mouth and professional referrals

However, information is often fragmented, inconsistent and spread across multiple platforms. Feedback highlights that directories and websites can be difficult to navigate or out of date, making it harder to identify appropriate support.

As a result, some young people perceive that support is limited or unavailable, when in practice it is not easily visible or understood. Despite this, Halton demonstrates strong partnership working, including:

- Links between services and schools
- Early help and safeguarding pathways
- Multi-agency collaboration (e.g. Halton Resolve)
- Emerging partnership models such as Right to Succeed

These provide a strong foundation for integration, although the system is not yet experienced as fully joined-up.

Young people emphasised that improving awareness is not just about providing information, but how and where it is shared. Suggested approaches include:

- Using social media platforms they already engage with
- QR codes in everyday spaces (e.g. buses, schools, community venues)
- Clear, simple messaging

Digital Platforms

Halton's digital offer includes platforms such as Kooth and Shout, alongside locally developed resources and information hosted on local authority and NHS websites. Digital support is valued for its accessibility, flexibility and privacy. However, provision remains fragmented, with variation in quality and visibility. Platforms can be difficult to navigate, with information spread across multiple sites and not always designed with young people in mind.

It is positive that there is ongoing development of digital solutions, including tools such as B-Bot and wider mapping of digital provision. These present an opportunity to develop a more coherent digital front door if aligned, simplified and co-produced with young people.



Parent, Carer and SEND Support

Halton offers a strong range of support for parents, carers and those with SEND, including:

- SEND-specific provision and peer support groups
- Family Hubs and early help services
- Neurodevelopmental support and training
- Targeted services for young carers and families

These reflect a strong commitment to whole-family support and early intervention. However, demand for SEND and neurodevelopmental support continues to increase, and access can be variable. There is a need to strengthen consistent, neurodiversity informed practice across all services and ensure environments are inclusive, flexible and accessible without reliance on formal diagnosis.

Additional Strengths

Halton benefits from a number of key strengths, including:

- A strong VCSFE and youth work sector
- Established outreach and community-based delivery
- Activity-based and relational approaches aligned with CYP preferences
- Emerging investment in youth hubs and integrated provision
- Strong links between services, schools and early help pathways

However, these strengths are often constrained by short-term funding, capacity pressures and system fragmentation, which can limit consistency, reach and long-term sustainability.



Change and Integration Programme
Together for Young Lives,
Cheshire and Merseyside

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What this means for Young People and those who support them

CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Gaps / Actions
Relational and trusted relationships	Strong across VCSFE, youth work and community provision and highly valued by CYP, but inconsistency in staffing, short-term interventions and transitions can disrupt trust and continuity of relationships	Amber	Sustain and scale relational models; prioritise continuity of workers and longer-term engagement; reduce short-term interventions and improve consistency through transitions
Safe, youth-friendly environments	Strong community and youth-based provision (e.g. Vibe, community venues), but limited consistent open-access and large-scale provision, with uneven distribution across areas and variable access to calm, non-clinical environments	Amber	Expand local, non-clinical and inclusive spaces, including development of Youthy and wider community assets; increase availability of relaxed, sensory-friendly environments
Activity-based support	Strong feature of the Halton system, particularly through youth work, outreach and programmes (e.g. sports, creative and skills-based provision), and closely aligned to CYP preferences	Green	Ensure consistent access across all neighbourhoods and embed activity-based approaches within early help and mental health pathways
Flexible and timely access	Some evening and weekend provision exists (particularly through youth work and outreach), but most therapeutic and early help support remains daytime-based, with limited structured out-of-hours emotional health provision	Amber	Expand out-of-hours provision across therapeutic and early help services; build on outreach and youth work models to extend support into evenings and weekends
Clear pathways and navigation	Multiple routes exist, but systems and websites are difficult to navigate, fragmented and lack a clear, visible entry point; CYP often unsure where to go or report “not knowing” how to access support	Red	Improve digital front door, streamline directories and co-produce a clear, youth-friendly navigation system; ensure support is visible, understandable and easy to access



Holding support while waiting	Examples of good practice exist (e.g. drop-ins, outreach, crisis cafés), but not consistently applied across the system and many CYP experience limited or no meaningful contact while waiting	Amber	Introduce a shared “holding support” approach, including proactive check-ins, open-access sessions and group provision so no young person waits without support
Continuity and sustained support	Support is often time-limited, with variation across services and multiple transitions, leading to repetition and reduced continuity of relationships	Amber	Move toward flexible, needs-led duration of support; improve handovers between services and reduce duplication and repeated assessments
Inclusive (neurodiversity-informed) support	Strong SEND and family-focused provision, but inconsistent understanding and accessibility within mainstream services; CYP report feeling misunderstood or not fully supported	Amber	Embed neurodiversity-informed practice across all services; increase staff confidence and ensure inclusive environments without reliance on diagnosis
Local access and transport	Strong use of community venues and outreach, but access varies by neighbourhood and reflects wider inequalities between areas (e.g. differences across Widnes and Runcorn)	Amber	Strengthen neighbourhood-based provision and outreach coverage across all communities; explore transport support and improve equity of access
Transitions (16–25)	Some provision available (e.g. employability, Youthy, SEND pathways), but offer is fragmented and not experienced as a clear or coherent pathway; CYP report feeling “in between” services	Red	Develop a coherent, visible 16–25 pathway with continuity, clear eligibility and stronger links between education, mental health and community support
NHS experience	Mixed experience; access often threshold-based, with variation in waiting times, limited out-of-hours access and reduced relational continuity	Red	Strengthen integration with VCSFE and community services; improve early access and continuity; reduce reliance on threshold-driven models



Visibility and awareness of services	Wide range of services exist but are often hard to find, poorly promoted or not clearly understood by CYP, leading to perceptions that support is unavailable	Amber	Develop clear, youth-friendly directories and coordinated promotion across schools, GPs, communities and digital platforms; ensure information is accessible, consistent and up to date
Timing of support vs need	Clear mismatch between when services are available and when young people need support, particularly outside school hours and during periods of pressure	Red	Align delivery with real-life patterns of need (evenings, weekends and peak stress points); develop a shared, visible timetable of local provision
Inequality and wider determinants	Wider pressures (e.g. poverty, family challenges, adverse experiences and deprivation) strongly shape wellbeing, demand and access to support	Red	Strengthen links between emotional wellbeing services, early help, family support and community provision; ensure services respond to the wider context of young people's lives
Workforce capacity and sustainability	Services operating under pressure, with reliance on short-term funding, particularly in VCSFE sector, impacting stability, capacity and continuity of provision	Amber	Invest in longer-term funding (e.g. 3–5 years) and workforce development; support sustainability, retention and capacity across community provision
System coordination and integration	Strong local partnerships and collaboration exist, but the system is still experienced as fragmented and not fully joined-up by CYP	Amber	Improve integration through shared pathways, clearer roles, improved information sharing and coordinated local service offers (including shared timetables)
Visibility and awareness of services	Wide range of services exist but are often hard to find, poorly promoted or not clearly understood by CYP, leading to perceptions that support is unavailable	Amber	Develop clear, youth-friendly directories and coordinated promotion across schools, GPs, communities and digital platforms; ensure information is accessible, consistent and up to date



Conclusion

This report highlights a system in Halton that is diverse, community-driven and underpinned by strong partnership working, but not yet consistently experienced by children and young people as visible, accessible or easy to navigate. The central issue is not a lack of provision, but how effectively services connect, align and operate together within a complex system.

A defining message throughout is the gap between what exists and what young people experience. Support is often helpful when accessed, particularly where it is relational and community-based, yet too many young people struggle to find it, understand it or reach it at the right time. For some, support is only encountered once needs have escalated, reinforcing a system that can feel reactive rather than preventative.

Across all engagement, young people's expectations are clear. They are not asking for more complexity or additional layers of services, but for a system that is easier to understand, closer to their everyday lives, and built around relationships that feel genuine and sustained. They want support that is visible, flexible and available when it is needed, rather than something they have to search for or wait for.

Their feedback points toward a clear direction of travel:

- support should be easier to find, clearer to understand and visible in the places young people already go
- relationships should be prioritised, with continuity rather than short-term or one-off interventions
- provision should reflect when young people actually need help, particularly outside school hours
- pathways should feel coherent and continuous, especially through key transitions such as moving into adulthood

Importantly, many of the building blocks for improvement already exist. Halton benefits from a strong and committed VCSFE sector, well-established youth work and outreach models, activity based provision aligned with young people's preferences, and integrated early help approaches through Family Hubs, schools and community partners. Planned developments such as Youthy and the Well Runcorn programme provide further opportunity to strengthen the system. However, these strengths are not yet experienced consistently. Challenges around visibility, coordination, access and sustainability continue to limit the reach and impact of provision, particularly for those less connected to school or community networks and for older young people navigating transitions.



The opportunity for Halton is not to redesign the system, but to strengthen, connect and scale what already works well. This means making support easier to find and understand, improving continuity, ensuring no young person is left without support while waiting, and aligning provision more closely with when and how need arises.

The risk is not the absence of provision, but that it continues to operate unevenly. The opportunity is to create a system that is visible, joined-up and dependable, where every young person knows where to go, feels confident accessing support, and receives help early and consistently.

Halton has strong foundations for a responsive and preventative system. The next step is to ensure these strengths are experienced consistently across all communities, so that every young person can access support that feels relevant, timely and built around them. As reflected across many young people's voices: support needs to be there, easy to find and available when it is actually needed.

Future development should build on a place-based model characterised by shared local ownership, a common agenda across partners, shared measurement of outcomes, and mutually reinforcing activities. The strength of relationships between communities, schools, youth organisations, families and statutory partners should be recognised as a core system asset. Long-term sustainability will depend on investment in community capacity, neighbourhood youth infrastructure and preventative approaches that strengthen identity, belonging and community wellbeing.



Recommendations

1. **Create a clear, youth-friendly front door for support**

Halton should develop a single, accessible and co-produced “front door” for emotional wellbeing support, bringing together all services in one place. This should be simple to navigate, regularly updated, and designed with young people to reflect how they search for and understand support

This should include:

- A digital platform with clear pathways and local options
- A “what’s on” view of support available that week
- Integration with schools, Family Hubs, community settings and social media

This should be complemented by visible, offline promotion (e.g. QR codes, transport-based messaging, schools and youth spaces) to ensure reach beyond formal systems.

2. **Expand evening and weekend emotional wellbeing support**

Halton should strengthen provision outside of traditional hours by extending emotional wellbeing support into evenings and weekends, building on existing youth work and outreach models.

This should include:

- Drop-ins and informal support sessions
- Community-based and mobile provision
- Greater availability of early help and therapeutic support beyond 9–5

3. **Guarantee consistent “holding support” while waiting**

Adopt a borough-wide “holding support standard” so that no young person is left without contact while waiting for support.

This should include:

- Regular check-ins and updates
- Access to group or drop-in provision
- Signposting to activity-based and digital support

This should be developed as a shared, system-wide approach, enabling services to work collaboratively to pool capacity, coordinate delivery and manage demand, rather than operating in isolation.



4. Strengthen relational continuity across services

Halton should prioritise relationship-based approaches by reducing short-term interventions and improving continuity across services and transitions.

This should include:

- Longer-term engagement where needed
- Consistent key workers or trusted adults
- Improved handovers between services

5. Develop a clear and coherent 16–25 pathway

Halton should create a joined-up pathway for older young people, spanning emotional wellbeing, mental health, education, employment and community support.

This should include:

- Clear eligibility and progression routes
- Stronger links between CAMHS, adult services and VCSFE provision
- Youth-friendly spaces for older age groups
- Opportunities for co-location of services, including models where CAMHS or health professionals are based within VCSFE or youth settings (building on examples such as Warrington Youth Zone).

6. Strengthen neurodiversity-informed practice across all settings

Halton should embed consistent neurodiversity-informed approaches across schools, services and community provision.

This should include:

- Training for staff across all sectors
- Sensory-friendly and flexible environments
- Support that does not rely on formal diagnosis
- Encouraging services to undertake self-assessment against neurodiversity-informed standards and adapt delivery to improve accessibility.

7. Improve visibility and coordinated promotion of services

Develop a coordinated, system-wide approach to promoting emotional wellbeing support.

This should include:

- Consistent messaging across schools, GPs, youth services and communities
- Youth-friendly communication formats
- Use of trusted local networks and spaces



8. Strengthen neighbourhood-based and outreach provision

Expand and better coordinate outreach and local delivery to ensure equitable access across all communities.

This should include:

- Increased coverage in underserved areas
- Stronger coordination across providers
- Clear pathways from outreach into ongoing support

9. Align support with the wider context of young people's lives

Ensure emotional wellbeing support is connected to wider early help, family support and community services.

This should include:

- Integrated support for families experiencing poverty, adversity or instability
- Strong links between wellbeing services and education, safeguarding and early help
- Place-based approaches reflecting local need

10. Invest in sustainability and workforce capacity

Provide longer-term, flexible funding to stabilise and grow the system, particularly within the VCSFE sector.

This should include:

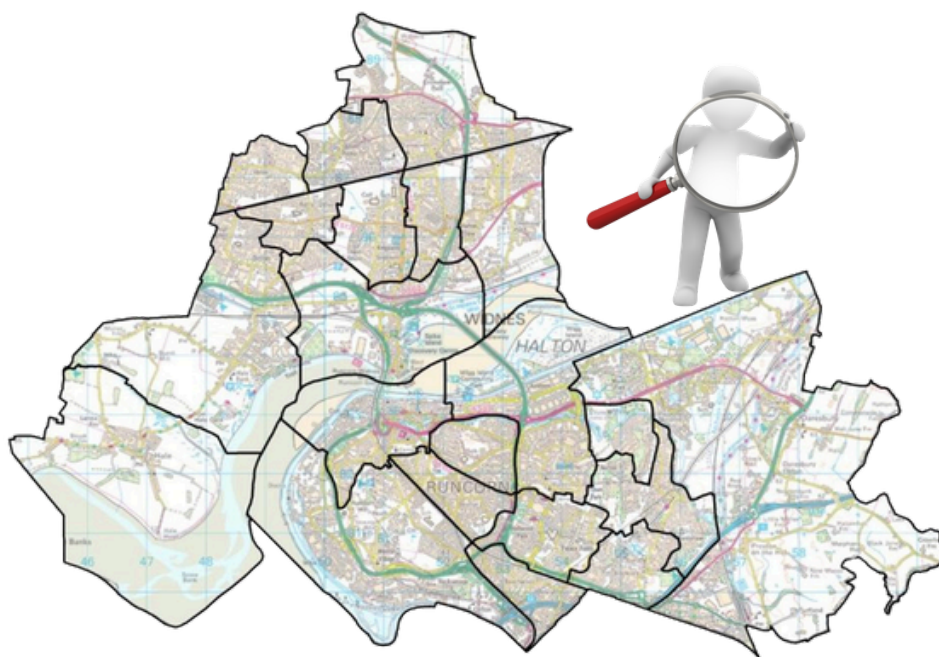
- Multi-year funding agreements
- Workforce development and retention strategies
- Support for community-based provision



List of Services

Activ Engagement & Education CIC
 Active Halton
 Advanced Solutions
 Autism Practical Support (APS)
 BCHFT (Children in care health service - Bridgewater)
 Career connect (also in LCR)
 CBUK (child bereavement)
 Chat Health Halton
 Drugs and alcohol youth support team
 Family Hubs
 Fit 4 Life
 Got Your Back (Cheshire)
 Halton D of E Open Award
 Halton SENDIAS/Halton SEND Partnership
 Halton Young Carers Centre
 Halton Youth Cabinet (run by Vibe)
 Hazlehurst Studios Youth Zine project
 Headz Up Halton drop-in hubs
 HIT team (Health Improvement Team)
 Kooth

Mako Create (Halton and Widnes)
 MHST
 Positive Future Consultancy Ltd
 Power in partnership (PIP) -
 Youthy (Hub in 2026 but deliver sessions out of community centres)
 Runcorn Mental health matters
 SEND R US
 Shout
 Sports Alive
 The Children's Society (Resolve)
 Transcend
 Venus
 Vibe
 Walton and Halton support hub
 We Are With You (Young People Halton)
 Well Runcorn (reconnecting Runcorn) - early 2026 opening. Health and education Hub
 Wellbeing Enterprises (Runcorn)
 Widnes crisis cafe - MH matters
 Youth Fed
 Glow



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