



Change and Integration Programme
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Cheshire and Merseyside

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Warrington

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



Cheshire West
and Chester



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
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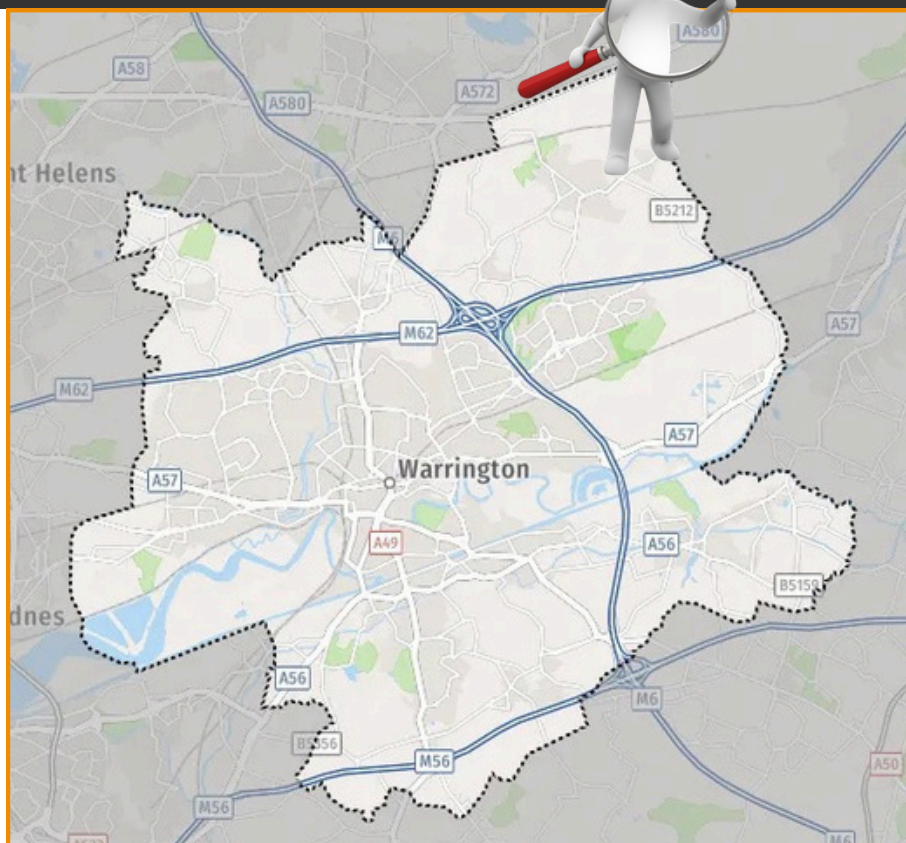


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Table of Contents

Foreword	2
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	7
Approach	8
Children and Young People's Voice	10
Current Landscape	14
Outreach Provision	17
Digital Platforms	19
What this means for Young People and those who support them	20
Conclusion	23
Recommendations	25
List of Services	29



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Executive Summary

This report has been developed as a complementary Warrington 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 to assess how well current early emotional wellbeing and mental health support meets local need

Why this review matters

Children and young people in Warrington are experiencing increasing levels of emotional distress, shaped by both national pressures and local factors including inequalities in access, pressures on families, and variation in support across schools and communities. These challenges are compounded by long waiting times, limited early or “while you wait” support, and ongoing difficulties at transition points, particularly into adulthood. At the same time, reductions in youth provision alongside rising mental health-related hospital admissions have contributed to a system that can feel overly focused on crisis intervention, reinforcing a perception among young people that support is difficult to access or does not exist.

What we did

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

- Mapping 40 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across Warrington
- Engagement with 22 children and young people locally, alongside insights from over 1,300 CYP captured through Healthwatch Warrington
- Input from VCSFE organisations, health partners, education and the local authority
- Analysis of local needs data, national policy and emerging best practice

This approach ensured findings reflect both lived experience and system-level insight.

What young people told us

Young people’s feedback was clear and consistent. They prefer informal, safe and non-clinical environments, with trusted relationships where they feel listened to and understood. However, waiting times, thresholds and complex access routes often delay support until crisis point, with schools remaining the main route in. Support is also most needed outside traditional hours, particularly evenings and weekends.

Young people highlighted that youth work and community provision works well, especially flexible, drop-in and activity-based support.

Overall, they want earlier help, stronger relationships and easier access to support in spaces where they feel safe and comfortable.



The current system

Warrington has strong foundations, including a diverse and innovative system with:

- A strong voluntary and community sector offer
- Established youth provision and youth hubs (e.g. Youth Zone, Youth in Mind)
- Evidence of effective partnership working
- Innovative models such as Pure Insight's 16–28 relational support

These reflect many of the approaches young people say work best.

However, the system is not yet experienced as fully coherent. There are:

- Complex navigation, with no single clear “front door”
- Variation in access depending on location, school engagement and awareness
- Gaps in provision for 5–11 and 16–25 age groups
- Inconsistent outreach and out-of-hours provision
- Challenges with transitions into adulthood and FE settings
- Limited coordinated holding support while waiting
- Ongoing workforce and funding pressures, particularly within the VCSFE sector

This results in a system that is strong in parts but still fragmented and uneven in accessibility.

What must change

To deliver a more effective and responsive system, the evidence highlights the need to:

- Develop a clear, youth-friendly “front door” to improve visibility and access
- Introduce consistent “holding support” so no child waits without help
- Develop an integrated 16–25 pathway to improve transitions and continuity
- Expand community, outreach and out-of-hours provision
- Strengthen neurodiversity-informed early support
- Improve system-wide promotion, visibility and coordination
- Support long-term sustainability through investment in the VCSFE workforce

The focus should be on connecting and strengthening existing provision, as well as expanding access where gaps exist.

A call to action

Warrington has strong partnerships and a diverse range of provision that reflects what young people say works. The opportunity now is to improve coordination, visibility and consistency so these strengths are experienced as a joined-up system.

By building on existing assets and placing young people's voices at the centre, Warrington can move towards a more preventative, relational and accessible system - where every child and young person can access the right support, at the right time, in the right place



Introduction

Children and young people's emotional wellbeing in Warrington is shaped by a combination of national pressures and local factors. The 2024–2025 Warrington Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) highlights inequalities in health outcomes, pressures on families, and variation in access to mental health support. These findings are reinforced by Healthwatch Warrington's emotional wellbeing review (2022–2024), which gathered feedback from over 1,300 children, young people, families and professionals, identifying increasing anxiety, challenges in accessing timely support, and inconsistent experiences across schools and services.

These local challenges reflect national trends. Around one in five young people are estimated to have a mental health condition, with young adults aged 16–25 facing heightened risks linked to financial hardship, cost of living pressures and the longer-term impact of the pandemic. Long waiting times and limited early or “while you wait” support continue to drive escalation, while transitions into adulthood remain a key pressure point, with many young people experiencing a sudden drop-off in support at 18 despite ongoing need.

At the same time, the system remains heavily weighted towards crisis response. Youth service funding has declined over the past decade, while mental health-related hospital admissions among 11–25-year-olds have increased. This has contributed to a widespread perception among young people, families and professionals that support is limited to CAMHS or crisis services, reinforcing the belief that “there is nothing out there.”

National policy is now shifting towards earlier, more accessible emotional wellbeing support. Initiatives such as Young Futures Hubs, expansion of 0–25 pathways through the NHS Long Term Plan, the National Youth Strategy, and strengthened whole-school approaches all signal renewed emphasis on prevention and community-based models. Evidence consistently shows that early intervention improves outcomes, reduces escalation, and is more cost-effective than crisis care.

Warrington is well placed to respond. The Starting Well Plan (2022–2025) sets out ambitions to strengthen early access to support, improve mental health provision in education, and reduce avoidable admissions.

This project builds on these foundations by mapping current provision, identifying gaps, and exploring how early emotional wellbeing and mental health support can be made more visible, connected and accessible, including for young people aged 16–25.



Aligned with national policy and the Cheshire & Merseyside Mental Health Plan, the aim is to strengthen prevention and early intervention so that young people in Warrington can access the right help, in the right place, at the right time.

The ambition is to move away from a system where support is only felt at crisis point, towards one where it is visible, trusted and available when it is first needed.

A young person-friendly version of this report will also be produced, alongside the wider Cheshire & Merseyside report.



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Approach

This report examines emotional wellbeing and early mental health support for children and young people aged 5-25. This age range was selected both to address the well-recognised challenges associated with transitions between children's and adult services, and to complement separate mapping work already undertaken for 0–5s.

Throughout this report, references to “Children and Young People” (CYP) relate specifically to this 5–25 cohort and “young adults” refers to those aged 16-25.

The work was informed by a mixed-methods approach, including:

- Mapping and review of 40 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across Warrington
- Direct engagement with 22 Warrington children and young people through surveys
- Input from VCSFE organisations, health partners and local authorities, capturing both provider and system level perspectives. These included visiting Warrington Youth Zone; discussions with Warrington colleges and commissioner Steve Tatham, as well as discussions with Warrington CVS colleagues
- Targeted engagement with groups less likely to access support, including neurodivergent young people, those with disabilities, and marginalised communities
- Desk-based analysis of local needs assessments as referred to in the introduction, national policy, and emerging best practice

This approach prioritised co-production, inclusion and practical system insight, ensuring findings reflect lived experience as well as delivery realities. Together, these methods provide a robust evidence base that integrates young people's voices with operational understanding from across the system.

Although the work initially centred on physical youth hubs, the scope was broadened to include outreach and digital support, recognising that not all young people can or will access help in a physical building due to factors such as stigma, disability, anxiety, or territorial concerns. This expanded scope allowed the project to more accurately capture how young people live, communicate, and seek help today.



Terminology within early mental health provision is often used inconsistently, with labels such as youth hubs, early support hubs, one-stop shops, mental health hubs, and youth centres frequently used interchangeably. For the purposes of this report:

- A youth hub refers to a physical, community-based, often youth designed space, that provides open access activities, advice, and early mental health support without referral, assessment, eligibility criteria, or a threshold for entry
- Emotional wellbeing and early mental health support refers to support for mild to moderate needs offered before issues escalate, aligning with the “Getting Advice” and “Getting Help” elements of the i-Thrive framework (a national approach to needs-led mental health support for children and young people - [About i-THRIVE](#) | [i-THRIVE](#)). However, it’s important to note that children and young people rarely experience support in a single, linear pathway; they often move between services or receive help from multiple places at once. For example, being open to CYP community MH support while also accessing support from a youth hub or a trusted adult in school. Their needs can also fluctuate, so a young person receiving “Getting Help” support may occasionally present to A&E for risk concerns without meeting the threshold to step up to CYP community MH support. This reflects the complexity of real pathways and the need for flexible, joined up responses across the system.
- Youth hubs are distinct from Family Hubs, which bring together services for whole family needs; however, this work considers how youth hubs connect with Family Hubs, schools, and wider community services.



i-THRIVE Framework



Children and Young People's Voice

Due to a lower number of survey responses for Warrington within this project (22), feedback from over 1,300 children and young people captured in the Healthwatch Warrington Emotional Wellbeing Review (2022–2024) has also been incorporated. Findings from direct engagement strongly mirror themes identified through Healthwatch Warrington, reinforcing consistent system-wide messages around access, relationships, timing, and the need for early, youth-friendly support. Key themes are outlined below:

Preference for informal, trusted and non-clinical spaces

Young people consistently describe a preference for support that feels:

- safe
- informal
- familiar
- non-judgemental

Preferred locations to receive support include:

- Home
- Youth hubs / youth clubs
- School (when relationships are trusted)
- Online (for privacy and accessibility)

Youth hubs are repeatedly named as preferred spaces because they are welcoming, activity-based and do not feel like “mental health services”.

Given that children and young people want more support delivered at home, there is a clear need to strengthen support for parents and carers. Expanding home-based provision would better reflect CYP preferences. Equipping parents and carers to recognise early mental health needs can help reduce escalation and prevent unnecessary referrals.

Relationships matter more than setting

Across responses, who provides the support often matters more than where it is delivered.



Young people value supporters who:

- listen without judgement
- show warmth and empathy (eye contact, time, care)
- already know them (e.g. family members, youth workers)
- allow choice and agency

Both adults and peers are valued:

- Many young people prefer a mix of peer and adult support, highlighting the importance of offering both options
- Some prefer peers for relatability
- Others value adults for reassurance and safety

"They were able to talk to me in a professional way where I could talk comfortably."

Trust, consistency and being taken seriously are repeatedly cited as the most important factors.

Youth work and community provision are highly valued

Where youth workers and youth spaces are mentioned (e.g. **Youth Zone/Youth In Mind**)

- Feedback is overwhelmingly positive
- Young people value drop-in access, no appointment needed, and activity-based support
- Activities such as rock climbing, arts, music and games are seen as therapeutic in their own right

Several respondents explicitly state they prefer youth-based support over therapy; emphasising the value of youth led-non clinical support:

However, funding constraints and limited availability are raised, suggesting unmet demand.

This contrasts with more mixed experiences of clinical services, where access and approach were more frequently identified as barriers.

"I find youth in mind a lot more helpful than therapy."



Experiences of clinical support highlight the need for earlier, more flexible help

Where therapy, CAMHS, doctors or mental health workers were involved, positive experiences were consistently linked to:

- feeling heard
- having sufficient time
- clear care and understanding

However, negative or mixed experiences highlight key system challenges, including:

- long waiting times
- talking-based approaches that feel too abstract
- a lack of personalised or practical support

"I have spoken to my mum and a paediatrician doctor and then it had to be the school who made the referral. There needs to be an easier way."

Several young people described having to deteriorate before support was offered. These experiences reinforce the need for earlier, more accessible, and more flexible support, particularly in community and non-clinical settings.

Waiting times and thresholds are a consistent system barrier

Young people are clear that access to support is often delayed:

- support is not available early enough
- thresholds mean support is often only offered at crisis point
- waiting times undermine trust in the system

One response captures this powerfully:

"Don't wait until I am out of control to sit up and listen."

"At times we have to be in crisis before something is done."

This theme reinforces the need for earlier, lower-threshold, open-access support.



Support needs are greatest outside school hours

Many respondents say they are most likely to need help:
after school

- in the evenings
- at night
- at weekends

This highlights a mismatch between young people's needs and traditionally office-hour services.

Activities are as important as talking

When asked what they would want in a supportive youth space, the most commonly cited activities included:

- chilling with friends
- art, music and drama
- sports and games
- learning new skills or hobbies
- quiet spaces

**"I could easily talk. No appointment
needed booking."**

Talking support is important, but young people repeatedly emphasise that it works best alongside activity, not instead of it.



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Previous experience of support

Of the 22 survey respondents who had received support previously, 84% found the support either very helpful or a little helpful, reinforcing that early help can work when it is accessible.

What made support good	What would have made it more helpful
Youth as they engage more and take their time to talk to you and always try to understand you as best they can	To listen a bit more and have an understanding
Being able to talk comfortably	More time for them to fully understand what was happening
Professional but approachable staff	To be more targeted and hands on rather than talking therapy
Feeling listened to and respected	A cup of tea
The support workers are easy to get along with and the activities are fun when I can attend	
I could easily talk - No appointment needed booking	

"I wish therapy wait times were not as long and you get a few more sessions than are given."

"That your service is phenomenal and please keep it up as you help so many young people, in ways you wouldn't think of! - youth in mind"

Young people's strongest preferences cluster around social connection, creativity and emotional support, with games/sports and skills/hobbies also valued but selected slightly less often.



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What Young People Want More Of

There are clear indications of what young people would like to see improved:

- More practical, hands-on support approaches, not just talking-based models
- Earlier access to support, before problems escalate
- More accessible support routes for those who have not previously engaged

While the survey did not directly ask how young people hear about services, responses indicate that access is primarily through formal routes such as schools, health professionals and family support. One young person described needing to go through multiple steps, including a paediatrician and school referral, to access help.

This suggests that awareness and access are often mediated by adults, rather than through open, self-directed routes. At the same time, young people showed a clear preference for more informal settings such as youth hubs and community spaces, highlighting a gap between how support is accessed and how young people would prefer to engage.

Suggestions for more creative, visible promotion beyond schools and GPs, which was particularly important for CYP who NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) include:

- Posters with helplines
- QR codes on buses
- Zines co-produced by CYP

In terms of service design, Warrington young people emphasise the importance of relationship-based support, where they feel safe, listened to and understood. There is also a clear preference for support that is flexible and easy to access, rather than overly formal or rigid. Feedback highlights the value of informal approaches, including spaces where young people can talk openly without needing appointments. Overall, this reinforces the need for early, person-centred support that feels approachable, responsive and tailored to individual needs.

Young people suggested service names such as:

Brew and yap

Helping Hands

Healing Minds

Yap about crap



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Current Landscape

Warrington has a diverse and innovative early emotional wellbeing and mental health system, with a strong voluntary and community sector offer, established youth provision, and evidence of effective partnership working. The system includes a mix of early help, youth work, school-based support and specialist pathways, reflecting many of the approaches that children and young people say work best.

Analysis of the 40 services identified through this review highlights a broad and varied offer, with key themes outlined below. While not exhaustive, this reflects the services most visible and accessible to children, young people and families, providing insight into the parts of the system that are easiest to navigate, and therefore what young people are most likely to encounter.

However, while there are clear strengths, provision is not yet fully consistent or equitable across all age groups, locations and access routes.

A partnership-driven system with strong community innovation

Warrington stands out for its culture of collaboration and innovation, particularly within the voluntary, community and youth sector. Several providers are delivering creative, community-rooted models that bridge traditional system gaps.

For example, Pure Insight's 16–28 offer provides home-based emotional wellbeing, mentoring and practical support that bridges the gap between youth and adult services. This model is rarely seen elsewhere and represents a sector-leading approach to relational, long-term support.

Similarly, partnerships such as the Youth Zone and CYPMHS collaboration demonstrate strong potential for integrated, community-based early help, offering:

- 7-day access
- Drop-in support
- A bridge for CYP aged 7–19 / 25 (SEND)

When fully embedded, this model has the potential to act as Warrington's informal "front door" to early support. Through Warrington Voluntary Action, the borough benefits from a strong network of voluntary sector partners supporting families, care leavers, young carers, cultural communities and those affected by trauma. Recent events have provided valuable opportunities to improve visibility, strengthen connections between services, and support a more coordinated system.



A strong youth and early help offer aligned to CYP preferences

Warrington offers a wide range of early help provision that reflects what young people say they want - informal, social, creative, youth-friendly environments rather than clinical settings.

This includes:

- Youth work-led provision (Youth Zone, Orford Youth Centre, YFC, Broomfields, Bridgewater)
- Drop-in groups, mentoring, and outreach
- Activity-based support including sports, arts, and social spaces

Youth Zone's "Youth In Mind" offer is a key asset, providing high-quality facilities, open-access support and strong mentoring pathways.

This aligns well with CYP feedback across Cheshire & Merseyside, where young people prioritise:

- Chill-out social spaces
- Creative and activity-based engagement
- Kind, trusted adults
- Support outside traditional hours

However, while provision is strong, access can vary depending on location, availability and capacity.

Location and Physical Access

Warrington Youth Zone provides a high-quality, central physical space for children and young people, offering a well-equipped, welcoming environment that supports a wide range of activities and early emotional wellbeing support. Its central location makes it a key asset within the borough, acting as a visible and accessible hub for many young people.

The facility-based model supports:

- Open-access, drop-in engagement
- A safe and consistent physical environment
- Delivery of a broad range of activities and support in one place
- Opportunities for young people to build relationships and access multiple services

Alongside this, Warrington Youth Service provides a strong and complementary community-based offer, delivering a range of groups across the borough.



This includes targeted provision such as TAGS (LGBTQ+ support), a Year 11+ group, and other youth programmes that support engagement beyond a single central location. The service is also particularly effective in promoting opportunities through social media, helping to increase awareness and reach among young people.

However, the centralised nature of the Youth Zone provision still presents some challenges in terms of equitable access. Young people living in more rural or outlying areas may experience barriers, including:

- Travel distance and cost
- Limited public transport options, particularly in evenings and weekends
- Reduced confidence or ability to access a central provision

This creates a risk that those who are already less connected to services may be least likely to benefit from a building-based offer.

Overall, while Warrington benefits from both a strong central hub and a distributed youth service offer, there is an opportunity to further strengthen accessibility through:

- Expanded outreach and detached provision
- Greater alignment between central and community-based offers
- Mobile or localised delivery in underserved areas
- Improved transport solutions or subsidised access

Inclusive and specialist support for diverse groups

Warrington demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusive and identity-based support, ensuring that children and young people from a range of backgrounds can access services that feel safe and relevant.

This includes:

- LGBTQ+ provision (e.g. TAGS)
- Support for young carers
- Male only groups
- Targeted support for Black and Asian children and young people (e.g. Empower)

There is also a particularly strong offer for care-experienced young people, with long-term, relationship-based mentoring, wellbeing tracking and community integration. This addresses a significant national gap and represents a key local strength.

However, previous commissioning insight has identified neurodiversity (ND) as a key area of focus, recognising the strong link between neurodivergence and emotional wellbeing needs.



This includes the need to strengthen understanding and support within early mental health services, particularly given long waiting times for ND assessment.

There is an opportunity to further develop workforce confidence and consistency across the system, including within MHSTs and schools, to better support children and young people with ND. This also includes strengthening support for parents and carers to understand neurodiversity and appropriate approaches.

Suggestions to strengthen SEND and neurodiversity awareness across existing services, including:

- 360° building tours
- staff training
- pastoral support for CYP
- flexible offers (peer groups, quiet/adapted sessions, 121 support)
- tools such as Knowing Me profiling ([What is the Knowing ME profiling tool - NHS Cheshire and Merseyside](#))

Multiple access routes, but navigation remains complex

Warrington benefits from a range of access models, including:

- Youth spaces
- Schools
- Home-based support
- Community venues
- Digital provision (e.g. Living Well, Happy? OK? Sad? Kooth)

This mixed model reflects CYP preferences and reduces barriers to access.

However, despite the breadth of provision, navigation remains complex:

- There is no single, clearly defined “front door”
- Awareness is variable, particularly for young people not in school or formal systems
- Professionals often rely on informal networks to signpost
- Current mapping approaches (e.g. Thrive documents) can become outdated and are often more accessible for professionals than for children and young people

This creates a system that is rich in provision but difficult to navigate, reinforcing a “you need to know where to look” culture.

Although the Living Well Warrington site is a well-recognised and valuable resource that brings together a wide range of services in one place, it appears to be more oriented towards parents, carers and professionals.



This may limit its accessibility for older children and young people who are seeking to independently find support.

In contrast, Happy? OK? Sad? is a strong example of a more youth-friendly approach, providing a clear breakdown of support by category rather than using professional terminology.

Digital safety and online wellbeing support are areas of emerging strength, with Warrington utilising the Qustodio Online Safety Hub, providing over 1,200 licenses to local CYP and families, and offering a model that could be replicated across the subregion.

There is a clear opportunity to strengthen visibility through:

- A youth-friendly digital platform that matches young people to services
- More coordinated promotion
- Improved system-wide navigation

Innovative ways of developing digital youth work can be found here - [1768-NYA-Digital-Youth-Work-Standards---DIGITAL.pdf](#)

Strong links with schools, but variation in delivery

Warrington has well-developed links between early help, schools and specialist services, including:

- School-based delivery (assemblies, groups, 1:1 mentoring)
- Mental Health Support Teams (MHST)
- Whole-school wellbeing approaches (e.g. My Happy Mind – 64% coverage)

This supports early identification and coordinated intervention.

However, delivery is inconsistent:

- Variation in pastoral capacity across schools
- Differences in engagement with external providers
- Inconsistent neurodiversity-informed practice
- Gaps in provision within colleges, particularly the absence of mental health practitioners

This results in a postcode lottery effect, where support varies depending on the setting. Previous commissioning insight has also identified school-based support as a key area for further strengthening, recognising the central role schools play in early identification and access to support, alongside the potential to expand programmes such as MyHappyMind across more schools.



Gaps in early help for younger children (5–11)

While there is some support for primary-aged children, provision is:

- Patchy
- Dependent on individual schools
- Not part of a consistent borough-wide pathway

This reflects national patterns around the “missing middle” for younger children and highlights a need to strengthen early emotional wellbeing support before needs escalate.

Mental health provision in Warrington’s schools is comparatively strong, with Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) well embedded and assisting in reducing referrals into specialist services. Warrington is identified as an area of high relative need, and MHSTs contribute to a preventative, whole-school approach supported by emerging neurodiversity profiling tools. Alongside this, Warrington demonstrates above average uptake of the My Happy Mind programme, implemented in 44 out of 69 schools (64% coverage), helping improve resilience, emotional literacy and SEND appropriate support for younger pupils and parents.

Variable capacity in youth work and outreach provision

Detached and outreach youth work exists in Warrington, but:

- Coverage is inconsistent across areas
- Capacity is limited by workforce constraints
- Evening and weekend provision does not fully meet demand

Young people consistently express a need for more out-of-hours support, particularly in evenings and weekends.

There are also geographic challenges:

- Limited outreach in rural areas
- Barriers to accessing central provision

Opportunities include:

- Expanding detached youth work
- Exploring mobile provision or community-based delivery
- Improving transport access to existing services



Transitions and support for 16-25 year olds

While Warrington has notable strengths, remain for older young people.

Challenges include:

- Inconsistent support post-18
- Difficult transitions from CYPMHS (formally known as CAMHS) to adult mental health services
- Limited youth-appropriate 18+ provision outside SEND pathways

This results in ongoing fragmentation for young adults, despite strong individual services.

Post 16 provision presents a significant pressure point. Warrington & Vale College, with over 5,500 students, holds high levels of mental health need but lacks dedicated mental health link workers or consistent CAMHS pathways for older adolescents, particularly those on neurodevelopmental assessment routes. Average annual suicide attempts remain concerningly high, and college staff provide a disproportionate level of emotional support in the absence of integrated services. Stakeholders highlighted a lack of continuity as CYP transition from school into college and the need for improved 16–25 pathways and joint working between education, health and community providers.

There is a clear opportunity to strengthen:

- Transition pathways
- Continuity of relationships
- Integrated 16–25 models linking education, youth and health services

Variation in “while-you-wait” and holding support

Although some services have relatively low waiting times, there is:

- Limited structured holding support
- Variation across providers rather than a coordinated approach

This can leave young people without support between referral and intervention, contributing to escalation.

Enhanced signposting and promotion across professionals and families, alongside the provision of structured ‘holding’ support within services, would help ensure that no child waits without support. To manage staffing, venue and resource constraints, providers could collaborate on weekly shared holding offers, rotating responsibility for drop-ins and combining online and face-to-face sessions.



Overall, Warrington demonstrates strong foundations in youth provision and early emotional wellbeing support, underpinned by a diverse voluntary sector and innovative partnership approaches. However, there are recognised gaps in early access, digital navigation, transitions to adulthood, neurodiversity support, and system coordination.

The findings highlight the need for a more joined-up, youth-centred model that spans early adolescence through to early adulthood, supported by clearer pathways and accessible digital and community-based routes into support.

Developing an Integrated and Sustainable Youth and Play Sector in Warrington

Warrington is now in an even better position to integrate and maximise the offer to children and young people, explore and implement new programmes such as Youth Futures Hubs and sustain and strengthen the VCSE Workforce through the development of Young Warrington. Young Warrington was established in 2023 and is now a Community Interest Company with a range of voluntary sector and statutory services including Warrington Youth Zone, Warrington Wolves Foundation, Broomfields Youth Project, Warrington Youth Service, Early Help, Public Health, Youth Justice and sport and leisure. Young Warrington is a collaboration of youth and play services that support young people to reach their full potential and achieve their hopes and ambitions. The vision is for Warrington to have a connected and collaborative youth and play sector.

Impact of short-term funding

Warrington has historically faced challenges in attracting external investment from government and grant funding sources, partly due to perceptions of the area as relatively affluent. In reality, Warrington is an area of significant contrast, with many neighbourhoods experiencing low income, deprivation, and poorer health outcomes.

Although it has been noted that there are some well-established, effective youth and emotional wellbeing provision in Warrington, provision is often fragile, grant-dependent and time-limited. This can lead to:

- Challenges recruiting and retaining staff, as short-term contracts reduce job security.
- Inconsistent staffing, limiting continuity and weakening relationships with young people.
- Loss of trusted relationships, impacting engagement and outcomes.
- Services frequently starting and ending, causing confusion and reducing confidence in provision.
- Limited long-term planning, restricting service development and sustainability.



What this means for Young People and those who support them

CYP Priority	Current Position in Warrington	Match?	Key Gaps / System Actions
Support that is easy to find and access	Warrington has a wide range of provision and access models, but navigation remains complex and fragmented. While some tools, such as Happy? OK? Sad?, offer more accessible, youth-friendly ways to find support, there is no single, clearly defined “front door,” and overall visibility of early help and “getting advice” services remains inconsistent.	Amber	• Develop a dynamic, youth-friendly digital front door for emotional wellbeing. • Improve visibility of early help and non-clinical offers across schools, colleges and community settings.
Welcoming, youth-friendly (non-clinical) spaces	Strong offer through Youth Zone, Youth in Mind, Bridgewater, TAGS and VCSE partners, closely aligned with CYP preferences.	Green	• Clearly position youth spaces as emotional wellbeing destinations, not just activity provision. • Protect and sustain community-based models as part of the wellbeing pathway.
Kind, consistent relationships with someone who listens	Youth-work-led, mentoring and VCSE models are strong and relational. Positive feedback for Youth Zone, Youth in Mind, Kooth and trusted adults, however consistency varies across services	Amber	• Embed relational quality standards across commissioned services. • Reduce churn and fragmentation between practitioners. • Explore extended sessions beyond traditional 6 sessions
Support outside school hours (evenings & weekends)	Youth Zone offers 7-day access, but detached youth work and out-of-hours coverage is inconsistent across the borough.	Amber	• Expand evening and weekend provision, particularly in areas of high need. • Align commissioning with out-of-hours demand.



Early help before crisis point	MHSTs are well embedded and contribute to reduced specialist referrals, and My Happy Mind coverage is strong (64%). However, early community access and provision for younger children remain inconsistent and can be based on age or geography.	Amber	• Develop a clear early help pathway for emotional wellbeing (5–11 and 11–16). • Strengthen prevention and “while-you-wait” support promoting “no child waits without support”
Support during transitions (CAMHS → adult, school → college)	Pure Insight provides a sector-leading 16–28 model, but gaps remain for non-SEND 18–25s and post-16 learners, particularly in FE.	Amber	• Strengthen 16–25 pathways across education, health and VCSE. • Improve continuity during CAMHS → adult MH transitions.
Youth-appropriate support for 16–25s	Limited structured offer for 18–25s without SEND. FE settings carry unmet emotional support burden.	Red	• Develop a dedicated 16–25 emotional wellbeing offer. • Embed MH practitioners in FE colleges and transition settings.
Non-clinical, relational support when statutory routes fail	Warrington has a strong VCSE ecosystem and Kooth provides immediate access for 11–18s.	Amber	• Ensure non-clinical routes are recognised as core, not peripheral. • Improve integration and referral flow between statutory and VCSE services.
Practical barriers removed (travel, cost, information)	Multiple access routes exist (youth spaces, schools, home-based and online), but navigation remains complex and awareness is variable. Travel and transport barriers, particularly for young people in outlying areas, can further limit equitable access.	Amber	• Improve local, place-based access. • Use digital tools and outreach to reduce information gaps.
Neurodiversity-informed early support	Warrington has a strong neurodiversity support offer (e.g. Advanced Solutions, CSNT, Youth Zone SEND), emotional wellbeing support is not consistently neuro-affirming and some can be dependent on diagnosis or formal pathways	Amber	• Strengthen ND-informed early help while awaiting diagnosis. • Upskill workforce and improve consistency of ND-aware practice.



Conclusion

The findings from Warrington present a clear and consistent set of themes: children and young people want support that is easy to access, youth-friendly, flexible, and rooted in trusted relationships. Their voices, captured locally through the Healthwatch Warrington Emotional Wellbeing Review, align closely with wider Cheshire & Merseyside findings and this project, with young people describing long waits, unclear pathways, inconsistent help outside school hours, and a reliance on non-clinical community spaces when statutory routes feel difficult to navigate.

At the same time, Warrington has significant strengths to build upon. The mapping highlights a diverse, committed and innovative local ecosystem, with strong youth work, specialist neurodiversity support, meaningful participation opportunities, and relational models such as Pure Insight's wraparound care-leaver offer. These strengths demonstrate a system that already contains many of the right foundations, relationships, creativity, community presence and flexibility, mirrored across the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

However, the system remains fragmented, with variation in access, visibility and capacity across neighbourhoods, age groups and levels of need. The most notable gaps relate to transitions from 16–25, fragmented navigation and inconsistent visibility of services, and the need for more consistent neurodiversity-informed early support. These gaps limit the potential impact of the positive work already happening and risk perpetuating the narrative that “there is nothing out there,” despite the breadth of local activity.

By strengthening navigation, extending access beyond traditional hours, embedding earlier emotional wellbeing support, formalising holding support for those waiting, and developing a clear 16–25 pathway, Warrington has a real opportunity to shift from a system that is often experienced as reactive and crisis-oriented to one that is preventative, relational and genuinely youth-centred.

Overall, this project highlights that Warrington is well-placed to lead the way in early mental health support across Cheshire & Merseyside, leveraging its strong partnerships, innovative models and community assets. With targeted investment, clearer coordination and co-designed improvements, the borough can create a more visible, connected and equitable early help system, one in which young people not only get support when they need it, but feel welcomed, heard and understood every step of the way.



Recommendations - Warrington

1. Create a Clear, Youth-Friendly Emotional Wellbeing “Front Door”

- Develop a single, youth-friendly digital access point for 5–25s, co-designed with children and young people. There may be an opportunity to develop a similar triage model to Branch in Wirral but tailored to your area, through the purchase of a licence and associated coaching and implementation support. This could provide a more cost effective route to adopting a proven model.
- Provide simple navigation, clear signposting and access to local groups and services.
- Ensure visibility across schools, youth provision, community spaces and digital platforms.

Impact: Earlier access to support, reduced escalation, clearer pathways and more equitable access.

2. Strengthen Early Emotional Wellbeing Support (Ages 5–11)

- Develop a consistent borough-wide early help offer for primary-aged children.
- Expand delivery through schools and community settings, including group-based and family approaches.
- Build on existing programmes (e.g. My Happy Mind) to improve emotional literacy and resilience.

Impact: Earlier intervention, reduced escalation and smoother transition into secondary education.

3. Introduce a Consistent “Holding Support” Offer Across Warrington

- Establish a coordinated, borough-wide approach to supporting CYP while waiting for services.
- Include regular check-ins, access to groups, online resources and safety planning.
- Embed expectations within commissioning and promote availability across professionals.

Impact: No child or young person left without support while waiting, improved engagement and reduced risk.



4. **Develop a Clear and Integrated 16–25 Emotional Wellbeing Pathway**

- Create a joined-up pathway across schools, FE, health and VCSE services.
- Strengthen transition planning, continuity of relationships and youth-appropriate 18+ provision.
- Explore dedicated roles or named workers to support continuity across transition points.

Impact: Reduced drop-off at 18, improved continuity and better outcomes for young adults.

5. **Expand Community, Outreach and Out-of-Hours Provision**

- Increase evening and weekend availability of support across youth and early help services.
- Strengthen detached and community-based outreach, particularly in underserved areas.
- Align youth provision with emotional wellbeing support where possible.

Impact: Improved access for marginalised groups and support delivered at the right time and place.

6. **Strengthen Neurodiversity-Informed Early Support**

- Increase neurodiversity-informed training across early help, schools and youth services.
- Improve access to early support for CYP awaiting diagnosis.
- Expand flexible, inclusive and ND-friendly provision.

Impact: Improved inclusion, reduced distress and lower reliance on specialist pathways.

7. **Improve System Visibility and Awareness**

- Develop a coordinated, youth-informed approach to promoting services across the borough.
- Use multiple channels, including schools, community spaces and social media.
- Co-produce materials with young people to ensure they are relevant and accessible.

Impact: Increased awareness, earlier help-seeking and reduced reliance on crisis pathways.



8. Sustain and Strengthen the VCSE Workforce

- Move towards longer-term commissioning (3–5 years) for early help and youth provision.
- Protect and prioritise investment in preventative services.
- Support workforce stability and retention.

Impact: Greater stability, stronger relationships and improved outcomes across the system.



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

YMCA ST HELENS
YMCA | Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you

List of Services

Warrington

Active Families (Fearnehead community centre)
Advanced Solutions
Bridgewater
Broomfield's Youth project
ChatHealth
Coffee Bar (Holy Trinity)
Creative Remedies
DSN (Deaf and Sensory Network) Youth Vibe
Empower
Get Warrington Talking (Gateway centre)
Happy OK Sad website
Impact -Warrington youth council
Kooth Warrington
Living Well Hub
Make Space Connect Hub (Commissioners have confirmed it will close in early 2026)
Making Space - Boost course
MHST
More than men (18+) (Whitecross community centre)
n-compass - Warrington Carers Hub
Offload - Men's Mental Fitness (Rugby League Cares)
Orford Youth Service / Orford Youth Base (part of WBC Youth Service)
PAUSE (Warrington Speak Up)
Peer Talk (Gateway)
St Josephs family centre
TAGS (Teenagers, Gender & Sexuality) — WBC Targeted Youth
Talk Hub CIC
Talking Point
Walton and Halton support hub
WANDS (Warrington Autism neurodiverse group)
Warrington children's specialist nursing team
Warrington Council Youth service
Warrington MH matters
Warrington YFC (Youth for Christ)
Warrington Youth Zone/Youth In Mind
Wellbeing Team (based from the towns community centres)
YMCA St Helens Listening Service (Warrington)
Youth Fed
Warrington Wolves - detached
Glys - Gay & Lesbian Youth Support Service



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