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Cheshire West and Chester

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:



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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.



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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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Executive Summary

This report has been developed as a complementary Cheshire West and Chester (CWAC) 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 CWAC are experiencing rising levels of emotional distress, reflecting national trends. While there is a broad range of support across statutory, voluntary and community sectors, the system remains difficult to navigate, inconsistent in access, and often weighted toward crisis rather than early help. Young people report that support is often only available once needs escalate, with long waits, unclear pathways and limited early intervention contributing to worsening wellbeing. Particular challenges exist around transitions into adulthood, access outside of school, and inequalities linked to geography and transport.

What we did

The review draws on a mixed methods approach, including:

- Mapping 63 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across CWAC
- Engagement with almost 500 children and young people through surveys and direct conversations
- Input from VCSFE organisations, health partners and local authorities
- Targeted engagement with groups less likely to access support, including neurodivergent young people
- Analysis of local needs data, national policy and best practice

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

What young people told us

Young people's feedback was clear and consistent:

- Support is often accessed too late, once needs have escalated
- Services are difficult to find, understand and navigate
- Waiting times and thresholds worsen mental health and reduce trust
- Relationships, trust and continuity matter more than short-term interventions
- Schools are important but cannot meet all needs
- Access is inconsistent and shaped by location, timing and transport
- Neurodivergent young people often feel misunderstood or unsupported

They also highlighted what works well: safe and informal environments, trusted adults, activity-based support, and flexible provision available outside school hours. Overall, young people want earlier help, clearer pathways, and support that fits around their lives



The current system

CWAC has a well-connected and collaborative VCFSE sector, supported by strong partnership structures and established alliances. However, this strength is tempered by the limited scale of mental health and emotional wellbeing provision delivered by the sector, alongside a reliance on short-term funding. This constrains capacity, reach and long-term sustainability despite the sector's clear system value.

Whilst many young people have positive experiences when they are able to access the right support, the system remains fragmented and inconsistent. There are:

- Gaps in provision across different geographical areas, particularly rural communities
- Limited open-access, youth-friendly spaces and out-of-hours support
- Over-reliance on schools as the main access point
- Challenges with visibility, navigation and coordination across services
- Ongoing issues with transitions and continuity, particularly for 16–25 year olds

As a result, the system operates as a collection of services rather than a clear, joined-up pathway.

What must change

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

- Strengthen early help and prevention, particularly before needs escalate
- Develop a clear, youth-friendly “front door” and improve system navigation
- Expand open-access, community-based and out-of-hours provision
- Address inequalities in access, including geography, transport and inclusion
- Improve transition pathways and continuity of support
- Embed relational, trauma-informed and neuro-affirming approaches across the workforce
- Ensure no child or young person is left without support while waiting for services

The focus should be on better connecting and enhancing existing provision, rather than creating new standalone services.

A call to action

CWAC has strong partnerships, a wide range of provision, and a clear understanding of what children and young people need. The challenge now is to improve consistency, coordination and access.

By building on existing strengths and placing young people's voices at the centre, there is an opportunity to create a more joined-up, visible and preventative system - where support is easier to access, available earlier, and shaped around young people's lives.



Introduction

Mental health and emotional wellbeing among children and young people is a significant concern locally and nationally, with around one in five young people experiencing a mental health condition. Despite widespread recognition of this, support systems remain heavily weighted towards crisis intervention rather than prevention. Years of reduced youth provision have contributed to a persistent narrative-voiced by young people, families and professionals alike - that “there is nothing out there”, reinforcing a binary perception that support is either CAMHS (Children & Adolescence Mental Health Service) or nothing at all.

National evidence demonstrates the consequences of this imbalance. While youth services have declined over the past decade, mental health-related hospital admissions among 11–25-year-olds have continued to rise. Young people with mental health needs face disproportionate challenges in education, employment and financial security, pressures intensified by the cost-of-living crisis and the long-term impact of the pandemic. Transitions between children’s and adult services remain a key point of risk, with long waits and unclear pathways increasing the likelihood of needs escalating.

These national pressures are reflected in Cheshire West and Chester. Evidence from the Youth Partnership Needs Assessment (May 2025) and wider system intelligence highlights emotional wellbeing as a consistent concern across communities. Young people and those supporting them describe familiar challenges: difficulty accessing early help, variation in support depending on where they live or go to school, and particular gaps for older teenagers, young adults, and those with SEND-especially in more rural parts of the borough. While youth spaces are valued as trusted and protective environments, provision is often experienced as fragmented or hard to navigate.

At the same time, CWAC is not starting from a blank page. There is a strong foundation of partnership working, a shared commitment to prevention, and alignment with the ambitions of the Cheshire & Merseyside Mental Health Plan. National momentum - through initiatives such as Young Futures Hubs and the growing emphasis on 0–25 pathways - creates a timely opportunity to strengthen a place-based approach shaped by local insight. Although Cheshire & Merseyside was not selected as an Early Adopter area for Young Futures Hubs, this allows CWAC to define a model rooted in its own communities and informed directly by the voices of children and young people.



This report responds to that opportunity. It aims to help shift the narrative from “there is nothing out there” towards a system where support is visible, trusted and accessible before crisis point. Drawing on local needs assessment evidence, system mapping and lived experience, it examines emotional wellbeing and early mental health support across CWAC - highlighting what is working, where gaps remain, and what must change to ensure support is preventative, equitable and grounded in the lives young people actually lead.

The ambition is simple but urgent: to move away from a system where help is felt only at the point of crisis, and towards one where early support is embedded in communities, available when it is first needed, and shaped by what young people themselves say helps them thrive.



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 63 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across CWAC
- Direct engagement with children and young people through surveys and discussions with young people at a Careers Fayre in Winsford (almost 500 responses in total)
- Input from VCSFE organisations, health partners and local authorities, capturing both provider and system level perspectives
- 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, 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

1. Early help is experienced as too little, too late

Across CWAC responses, young people repeatedly described support as something they only reached once things had already escalated, often following long waits or repeated disclosures.

Young people; particularly in Chester, Ellesmere Port and Winsford spoke about:

- delays in accessing CAMHS (now known as CYPMHS - Children & Young People's Mental Health Services)
- short-term interventions that ended before they felt ready, and
- a sense that early distress was not taken seriously.

"We need support before it gets bad, not just when people are in crisis."
(Young person, Ellesmere Port)

What this tells us - Young people are asking for support earlier, sooner, and before crisis thresholds are reached.

2. Relationships matter more than services or labels

CWAC young people placed huge value on who they speak to, not just where support sits. Being listened to, believed and treated with kindness consistently shaped whether support felt helpful. Also, the continuity of relationship and less rigid lengths of interventions, so moving away from 6 sessions only. This was especially clear in Chester, Northwich and Ellesmere Port responses.

"They were non-judgemental and empathetic. That's why it helped." (14-16, Ellesmere Port)

If it was one service, for a long period of time, rather than 6 weeks here and there, and only getting help in crisis but not when I actually would've benefitted from it."

What this tells us - Young people do not experience support as a "pathway"; they experience it as a relationship. Workforce consistency and quality matter as much as access.



3. School-based support is valued, but limited and pressured

Many CWAC young people described school as the only accessible place to get help, but also highlighted significant limitations.

Common issues included:

- being taken out of lessons (increasing anxiety),
- limited session numbers,
- lack of choice, and
- support stopping abruptly.

Most young people prefer to speak to someone during the evenings, after school, or at weekends - times when they're more relaxed, available, and away from formal structures; therefore, the need for flexibility and choice in when they receive support, not solely in school time.

"The sessions were often in the middle of lessons and that made my anxiety worse."
(Aged 17-25, Chester)

"My mum had to pay for counselling when school sessions ran out. It's expensive." (Aged 10-13, Chester)

What this tells us - Schools are a critical access point but cannot carry the emotional wellbeing system alone. Young people want support beyond school - in places that feel less pressurised.

4. Youth spaces are seen as safe - but uneven across CWAC

Young people consistently described youth services as:

- safe,
- less judgemental,
- easier to talk in,
- somewhere you can just "be".

However, access varied significantly by geography, particularly in rural areas of CWAC. Older young people (especially those in Year 9 and above) described a lack of suitable places where they could go to talk about their feelings. For example, some young people in Winsford were aware of a local youth hub but felt it was aimed at younger children. They also described the building itself as "not nice," which discouraged them from attending. Instead, they expressed a preference for a more informal, youth café-style environment.



More broadly, many young people highlighted the need for spaces designed for older age groups, such as youth centres where they can meet friends and take part in activities like table tennis, football, art, music, and life skills support. Central to this was the importance of a welcoming, youth-friendly environment.

"There aren't many places to go where I live unless you can travel." (Young person, rural CWAC area)

What this tells us - Youth spaces are protective environments, but provision is patchy. For many young people, access depends on postcode and transport.

5. **Neurodivergent young people feel misunderstood and overlooked**

Young people with neurodivergence or sensory needs across CWAC described:

- environments that were too loud or crowded,
- professionals lacking understanding,
- coping mechanisms being misinterpreted as behaviour problems.
- A desire for youth spaces (e.g. cafés) that are sensory-friendly, with adaptations such as different lighting options, weighted blankets and lava lamps to support comfort and inclusion.

"Most youth offerings aren't accessible to me. I struggle with noise and groups." (Aged 10-13)

"Teachers don't always understand that I'm disabled, not being difficult." (Aged 14-16, Chester)

What this tells us - Young people want choice, sensory-informed spaces and practitioners who understand neurodiversity - not just referral routes.



6. Practical barriers shape whether support is possible at all

Even when services exist, CWAC young people described transport, timing and cost as decisive barriers, particularly in rural areas and for older young people.

"Even free things aren't free if you can't get there."

"Late buses feel unsafe and it takes too long to get anywhere."

"Evenings and weekends are when I actually need help."

What this tells us - Access is not just about availability - it is about when, where and how support fits into young people's real lives.

7. Young people want a system that feels joined-up and visible

Many CWAC young people expressed confusion about:

- what support exists,
- where to go first,
- what happens next.

This reinforces wider system findings about fragmentation.

"I didn't know what was available or where to go"
(Aged 17-25)

What this tells us - Young people want clarity, navigation and consistency, not multiple disconnected services.



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How Young People Hear About Services

Most awareness of services comes through schools, which appear to be the main gateway to support, or informally via friends. Parents are also often the first source of support for young people, with very little evidence of young people independently “finding” services. While it is positive that schools play a key role in providing and promoting support, more creative and visible promotion beyond schools would be beneficial, particularly for those children and young people who are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Suggestions include:

- Posters with helplines
- QR codes on buses
- Better visibility of services before crisis
- More promotion of youth groups

Below is an overview of what CYP in CWAC have found helpful about previous support received, and what they found unhelpful:

What made support good	What made support unhelpful
Feeling heard, safe and not judged	Long waits and delays
Kind, relatable staff	Short-term or cut-off support
Time and continuity	Not being listened to properly
Practical coping support	Wrong person / poor match
Activities and informal spaces	Inflexible systems (fixed sessions, rigid school-based timings, difficulty accessing outside of school)
Flexibility and accessibility	Feeling excluded or not meeting thresholds
Right person at the right time	System fragmentation (unclear pathways, retelling stories)
	Accessibility issues (for example disability, ND and anxiety)



What young people want more of

- They want support earlier, before crisis
- They value relationships, kindness and being believed
- More personalised / better matched support
- They need safe, youth-friendly spaces beyond school
- More activities and safe spaces
- They want support that is inclusive and works for neurodiverse young people
- They need practical barriers (travel, timing, cost) taken seriously
- They want the system to feel joined up, visible and easy to understand

In Cheshire West and Chester, these priorities combine into a clear vision for how services should be designed. Young people are describing a system that is relational, flexible and easy to navigate, where support is available early and consistently, without rigid thresholds or complex processes. They favour local, community-based provision, particularly youth hubs and informal spaces, where support is available alongside everyday activities and where they can engage on their own terms. Overall, the feedback points strongly towards an early help, youth-work-led model, embedded in places young people already feel comfortable, rather than formal, time-limited or service-heavy approaches.

Young people suggested service names such as:

Youth-phoria

Beautiful Minds

Mind Haven

Don't hide away - come say hey

The Nest

They also shared a clear message:

“It took ages to get this help - too long. Help like this should be easier to get.”

“We don’t want to wait until things are really bad. We want help when we first start struggling.”
(CWAC young person)



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Current Landscape

Cheshire West and Chester has a large, diverse and active early help and emotional wellbeing system, with provision spanning universal prevention, targeted early mental health support, and a strong VCSFE sector. This includes groups and services supporting specific communities, such as women, LGBTQ+ young people, and those focused on employability and creative activities.

Initial analysis highlights a broad and varied offer, with many services embedded within communities and schools. Youth spaces are consistently identified as emotionally safer than clinical settings, and many services in CWAC operate flexibly within community environments.

While not exhaustive, this section reflects the provision that is most visible and accessible to children, young people and families, providing insight into what is most likely to be encountered in practice.

These services can be broadly grouped into:

- ✓ NHS / Local Authority statutory services
- ✓ Voluntary sector services (VCSFE)
- ✓ Youth work and early help provision
- ✓ Neurodiversity and SEND organisations
- ✓ Counselling and therapeutic support services
- ✓ Targeted provision for specific cohorts (e.g. LGBTQ+, young carers, homelessness, care-experienced young people and domestic abuse)

A full list of services is provided in the appendix.

Location and physical spaces

Provision varies across CWAC, with stronger coverage in urban areas such as Chester, Northwich and Ellesmere Port. In contrast, access in rural communities and smaller towns is more limited, with transport identified as a consistent barrier to engagement.

In some areas, delivery relies on temporary or rented spaces, which are not always youth-friendly or fit for purpose. This contributes to variation in young people's experiences depending on location, with some communities lacking consistent, neighbourhood-based support.

There is currently no open-access youth hub in CWAC.



Plans to develop a youth hub in collaboration with Storyhouse in Chester are positive, although progress is funding-dependent and will require support and promotion to ensure accessibility for those outside of Chester. Likewise, Theatre Porto in Ellesmere Port is a strong example of a purpose-built, activity-based youth venue, but continued promotion and accessibility are key to maximising reach.

Importantly, CYP consistently favour spaces that are activity-led, with emotional wellbeing support embedded within them, rather than stand-alone mental health settings. Youth cafés or hubs could help bridge this gap and reduce stigma. For example, café-style environments with informal drop-ins and on-site practitioners or partner agencies have been effective elsewhere. This includes Warrington, where a youth café with on-site mental health practitioners, accessible without appointment, contributed to reduced waiting lists.

While Family Hubs are a valuable resource and could support signposting to youth and mental health services, they are primarily focused on younger children and parents rather than older age groups.

It is positive that youth service staff are trained in mental health first aid, and there are opportunities to further develop the role of youth workers, subject to funding. These include plans to integrate youth workers into hospital settings and expand their contribution to wider community issues such as knife crime and anti-social behaviour. However, currently the youth service is reported to be largely focused on signposting, and although work is being undertaken on expanding physical youth spaces, there is less on outreach support.

Age Ranges Covered and School Support

Provision spans a wide age range, with coverage appearing strongest for secondary school-aged young people, largely due to the central role of schools in accessing support. There appears to be more limited early emotional wellbeing provision for children aged approximately 8–12, where needs may not meet thresholds for specialist services but are beyond light-touch community support.

Although there is good coverage in relation to support in schools such as My Happy Mind, ELSA and Mental Health in School Teams (MHST's) with full coverage expected by 2029, school-based services cannot be relied upon alone as they can:

- be time limited
- often end abruptly
- increase anxiety for some young people due to stigma of coming out of lessons
- Young people not in school (EHE, excluded, NEET, attendance issues) are excluded



Positively, there are wellbeing-focused alternative provision offers for children and young people who are not in school, on reduced timetables, or experiencing poor attendance. Current provision for this group includes services delivered by Power2, We Mind the Gap, Inspiring Your Future, and more recently a small collaboration between Platform for Life and Rage Fitness.

Additionally, while mental health support in schools is effective for many CYP, it does not mean that all children who need support are able to access it. There will still be a need to signpost to other services where children do not meet thresholds or where capacity within schools is limited. Some MHST and school practitioners also highlighted that they are not always aware of the full range of local services available, which can make effective signposting more difficult. Strengthening awareness and promotion of available services will therefore be key to enabling earlier support for children and young people in CWAC.

While some local services extend into young adulthood including Youth Federation, young people continue to experience challenges during transition points. This includes:

- Changes in thresholds and service models
- Loss of trusted relationships
- Reduced availability of age-appropriate, universal support

As a result, there remains a need for more consistent and visible pathways, particularly for those aged 16–25. Nevertheless, The Pledge is a very good example of local employers, schools, and youth workers, working with young people (including those not in education or employment) and parents and carers to provide CYP access to opportunities that develop employability skills and personal qualities, enabling informed choices about employment, training or further study. Employers work directly with young people, as well as teachers, parents, carers and youth workers, to highlight local employment opportunities. Youth Fed's employability programme and Back on Track, a support pathway for vulnerable young people not in education or work, are also strengths.



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Access and Holding Support

Services are accessed through a mix of referral-based and open-access routes. Many targeted and therapeutic services require formal referral pathways, while some community and youth services offer more flexible or informal access.

There are a number of effective programmes in CW&C that support earlier wellbeing and mental health needs, helping to reduce escalation and demand on CYPMH services. These include Youth Federation's Your Mind Matters, which provides strengths-based early intervention through 1:1 and group support, including youth-led peer approaches. It offers accessible support for children and young people whose needs may not meet CYPMH thresholds, with onward referrals (with consent) to additional or specialist provision where required.

In addition, Thriving Families, delivered across Chester, Ellesmere Port, Northwich and Winsford, provides bespoke early family support via a self-referral model. Jointly funded by CW&C and Cheshire Community Foundation and led by Koala North West and Home-Start Warrington & Cheshire, it offers 1:1 mental health support (e.g. counselling and art therapy) within approximately six weeks. Delivery is underpinned by a strong partnership model, including organisations such as Healthbox, Her Place, Platform for Life and Power2.

Despite the range of provision, access can be inconsistent:

- Early support is often not accessed until needs escalate
- Young people may not meet criteria for higher-level services but still require support and may not know how to access it

As there is currently no dedicated open-access youth hub in CW&C, the availability of the following is limited:

- Drop-in support
- Evening and weekend provision
- Informal, non-clinical environments

"More support whilst being on the waiting list and better transition from CAMH's to adult services"

This creates a need for stronger "holding support" to bridge waiting periods and thresholds, particularly through community-based and youth-led provision. Some services already offer effective open-access models, such as Wellbeing Wednesdays, which provide a good foundation to build on. This could be further strengthened through enhanced signposting and promotion across professionals and families, or through the direct provision of holding support by services. To manage staffing, venue and resource constraints, providers could collaborate to deliver shared weekly provision, rotating responsibility for drop-ins and using a combination of online and face-to-face support.



Visibility of Services and Partnership Working

Although CWAC has a wide range of provision, visibility and navigation remain key challenges:

- Young people and families report uncertainty about what support is available
- Professionals often rely on local knowledge to signpost
- Multiple entry points can result in inconsistent experiences

In some cases, limited promotion of services is intentional, due to capacity constraints and concerns about generating unmet demand. There are well-regarded services supporting thousands of young people each year, but many operate with waiting lists. When these reach capacity, referrals may be paused or closed, which can lead families to default to more well-known services such as CAMHS. This can create bottlenecks and leave families feeling disheartened. In addition, several providers noted a lack of dedicated marketing resource, which limits how widely services can be promoted. Collectively, these factors reduce accessibility and awareness across the system.

This reinforces the need to ensure that no child waits without support, whether through effective signposting, open-access provision that does not require referral, or the availability of holding support.

To help mitigate these challenges, a more collaborative, system-wide approach to demand management is needed. This could include services working together so that when one provider experiences increased referral pressure, another can absorb additional demand.

There are examples of this working effectively in practice. For instance, partnership working between St Joseph's and Mersey Care in Warrington helped to significantly reduce waiting times. Similarly, Wirral's Branch triage model demonstrates how coordinated triage and matching can direct children, young people and families to the most appropriate support more quickly.

Improving visibility and spreading demand more evenly across the system would increase access to early support and reduce pressure on statutory pathways. However, there is also a risk of offering too many options, which can feel overwhelming. Sefton's ReCITE project provides a useful example of addressing this through youth-informed approaches to communication, including a co-produced service map, a 'Mental Health and Me' zine, and practical guidance to support referrals.



Any local promotion approach should consider digital poverty and forthcoming changes to legislation on children and young people's phone and social media use, ensuring a blended digital and paper-based approach.

CWAC benefits from a well-established and active Children, Young People & Families (CYPF) Alliance led by Cheshire West Voluntary Action (CWVA), which operates alongside a joint subgroup spanning the MH and CYPF alliances. This has brought together CYPF-focused mental health providers since 2024, with the integrated forum having been instrumental in the development of the Young Hearts Strong Minds (YHSM) partnership project.

YHSM is an example of an innovative offer that has emerged from effective partnership working between YouthFed, Cheshire Young Carers, the ICB (Integrated Care Board) and CWVA. The successful early intervention programme, now in its 3rd year, spans 24 primary and high schools in CWAC, aimed to equip young people with comprehensive coping strategies designed to support behavioural and emotional regulation, as well as professional counselling services being made available to students requiring further support. The evaluation demonstrates positive impact including "improved wellbeing, reduced isolation, stronger engagement with education, and reduced pressure on families and other public services", with 87% of pupils having made measurable improvements following one-to-one intervention.

Emerging developments in partnership working, including plans for a youth hub model through Storyhouse and Open Door, exploration of a 24/7 hub in Winsford (18+), and initiatives such as The Pledge, offer further opportunities to improve coordination and transitions across the system.



Outreach Provision

Outreach and community-based delivery are present within the CWAC system, particularly through youth services and VCSFE organisations. The Young People, Early Help and Prevention team provide five weekly contact points across different areas and offer targeted support, including SEND, youth voice and LGBTQ+ provision. However, delivery is variable and not always consistently available across all parts of the borough.

There is potential to strengthen:

- Detached and community outreach models
- Delivery in familiar environments where young people already spend time
- More visible and consistent presence across neighbourhoods

Expanding outreach approaches could improve engagement with young people who are less likely to access formal services, particularly those who are not in school or who experience barriers to attending structured provision.

Developing a clear and shared timetable outlining which services are operating in specific locations, and on which days, would support greater awareness of existing provision and improve access for children and young people. It would also help minimise duplication, ensure more coordinated coverage, and make it easier to identify gaps in areas that are not currently being reached.

A successful option in some areas nationally, is the use of a mobile provision. Examples include Sports Alive truck in Halton, Bar N Bus in Essex, and Sandwell Youth Bus.

Mobile provision offers a flexible way to deliver support directly within communities, helping to overcome barriers associated with traditional, building-based services. By meeting children and young people in familiar environments, it supports earlier engagement and helps normalise conversations around emotional wellbeing.

It is particularly effective in reaching those who may be less likely to access support, acting as an accessible and visible point of contact. This enables timely advice, informal support, and clear pathways into more targeted services where needed.

Mobile approaches can adapt to local need, targeting areas with lower provision or uptake and offering support at times that better reflect young people's lives, including after school and evenings. They also provide a practical solution where there is limited youth infrastructure, creating safe, informal spaces within the community.



In addition, mobile provision supports a more efficient and responsive system, strengthening multi-agency working while offering a cost-effective alternative to fixed-site delivery.

Other approaches have included partnerships with local supermarkets and fast-food outlets, places where young people are known to spend time, supported by agreements and training for staff, including security teams, in youth engagement approaches. This helps create more inclusive and understanding environments, ensuring young people are treated with respect, not unnecessarily moved on, and can be supported appropriately where needed.



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Digital Platforms

Outside of the Live Well directory, there is no single, clear, youth-friendly website in Cheshire West and Chester that brings together mental health support in a way that is easy for children, young people and families to navigate. While individual services and council webpages provide useful information, these are fragmented and often require prior knowledge of the system to access. As a result, young people are more likely to encounter support through school or professional routes rather than independently identifying and accessing services themselves. Limitations and opportunities regarding online support can be found below:

Current limitations:

- Information can feel complex or more suited to professionals
- Navigation is not always intuitive for young people and families leading to confusion about what exists
- Multiple platforms can create confusion and inconsistent experiences
- Professionals themselves rely on personal knowledge and don't always feel equipped to signpost to other services

There is an opportunity to develop a more accessible “digital front door” that:

- Is youth-friendly and easy to navigate
- Supports self-referral and triage
- Clearly matches needs to appropriate support

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



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Parent, Carer and SEND Support

There is a broad range of support available for parents and carers, including:

- Family Hub offers
- Universal parenting programmes
- SEND-specific groups and services

The system demonstrates strength in SEND provision, with a number of services offering support without requiring a formal diagnosis. However, gaps remain in:

- Emotional wellbeing support for neurodivergent young people
- Flexible support that focuses on anxiety, regulation and mental health
- Sensory-friendly, low-stimulation spaces outside structured provision

There also remains a clear need and opportunity to strengthen SEND and neurodiversity awareness across existing services, examples include:

- 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](#))

There is also an opportunity to further equip parents and carers to identify and respond to early emotional wellbeing needs, supporting earlier intervention and reducing escalation.



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Impact of short-term funding

Although it has been noted that there are some well-established, effective youth and emotional wellbeing provision in CWAC, provision is fragile, grant-dependent and time-limited (numerous contracts end 2026–27). 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.

Key Strategic Implication

The issue in CWAC is not a lack of services, but a system that is busy, fragmented and reactive, rather than preventative, relational and easy to navigate. System redesign is therefore required, not service proliferation.

Examples of how to strengthen existing provision (without creating new services)

- Accelerate youth hub developments (e.g. Storyhouse/Open Door), with a view to expanding into underserved communities to increase access to dedicated youth spaces
- Develop community-based delivery models, including collaboration with local cafés and community venues, where partner agencies or mental health workers can offer visible, accessible support without the stigma
- Improve visibility and navigation of existing provision, including a clear, accessible “what’s on” offer/timetable across areas to reduce pressure on high-demand services
- Introduce a more coordinated triage approach, enabling services to flex and support one another when capacity is reached - reducing bottlenecks and the need to close referrals
- Address access barriers in rural areas, including exploration of subsidised transport options for children and young people
- Strengthen youth engagement in everyday community spaces, such as leisure centres and other venues frequently used by CYP. This could include training staff (e.g. venue staff and security teams) in youth engagement approaches, helping to create more inclusive environments where young people feel welcomed, understood and appropriately supported

These approaches focus on maximising and better connecting existing provision, rather than creating additional services, to deliver a more accessible and sustainable system.



What this means for Young People and those who support them

RAG Rating Key

Red – Significant gap requiring system change

Amber – Partial alignment; improvement needed

Green – Strong alignment with CYP priorities

CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Key Gaps / System Actions
Youth friendly hubs / safe spaces to talk about wellbeing	CWAC has strong youth provision but no visible, consistent youth specific emotional wellbeing hub. Emotional support is spread across services and settings; CYP report uncertainty about where to go when struggling.	Red	Develop a clear, youth friendly wellbeing access model (hub or network model, physical + outreach). Accelerate funding for the Storyhouse/Open Door collaboration
Support outside school (community based)	Schools and MHSTs are a major access route, but CYP who are anxious about school, excluded, home educated or NEET have fewer options. Community provision exists but is uneven and not always clearly linked to emotional wellbeing pathways or referral routes	Amber	• Strengthen community based emotional wellbeing offer beyond school settings • Expand non school support for CYP not engaged in education



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CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Key Gaps / System Actions
Flexible times (after school, evenings, weekends)	Some youth activities run evenings/weekends, but most emotional wellbeing and therapeutic support operates in office hours. Crisis support exists for adults; early help options for CYP outside 9–5 are limited.	Red	• Expand emotional wellbeing provision beyond 9–5, including after school, evenings and weekends • Pilot evening youth led wellbeing drop ins • Align youth service evening provision with emotional wellbeing workers
Feeling listened to, believed and respected	CYP report very positive experiences where relationships are strong, but experiences are inconsistent and depend on individual practitioners or services rather than a shared system standard.	Amber	• Embed relational, trauma informed, youth centred practice as a system expectation • Strengthen reflective practice, supervision and workforce development • Use CYP feedback to inform service design and improvement consistently • Move away from rigid session limits (e.g. six-session models) and introduce more flexible approaches that allow the length and intensity of support to be tailored to individual need
Early help before crisis	CWAC has a wide early help offer, but CYP describe long waits, thresholds, and escalation before support. Early distress often sits between youth support and CYPMHS thresholds and some key services have to pause referrals due to demand.	Amber	• Develop a clearly defined EWB offer, potentially informed by models such as Branch/As One • Increase commissioning of low threshold, early intervention support for mild–moderate needs • Improve fast, supportive responses at first presentation of distress and promote services across professionals including GP's and family hubs



CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Key Gaps / System Actions
Neurodivergent friendly environments (autism / ADHD / sensory)	Strong SEND and ND activity exists (social groups, inclusive provision), but emotional wellbeing support is not consistently neuro affirming and some can be dependent on diagnosis or formal pathways	Amber	• Increase neuro affirming EWB provision (quiet spaces, flexible formats) • Offer 1 to 1 alternatives to group based models • Build ND competence across the whole EWB workforce
Clear information about what help exists	Live Well CWAC and service directories exist, but CYP report difficulty understanding what support is available and what happens next. Navigation relies heavily on professionals or chance connections.	Red	• Develop a clear, CYP-friendly wellbeing pathway (not just a service directory) • Use plain language, visuals and youth tested formats • Promote consistently via schools, youth workers and social media
Continuity and trusted relationships	Some services span age ranges, but CYP often experience cliff edges, particularly around age 18 or when time limited interventions end.	Amber	• Prioritise continuity of relationships, not just eligibility; move beyond fixed session models • Improve transition planning and relational handovers • Commission models that allow flexible length of support based on need
Local provision they can travel to	Provision is stronger in main towns (Chester, Ellesmere Port, Northwich). Rural areas and smaller communities rely on transport, which CYP identify as a real barrier.	Amber	• Expand neighbourhood based and outreach models • Use mobile, pop up or satellite delivery in under served areas • Consider transport support as part of access, not an afterthought including free or subsidised transport for CYP



Conclusion

Cheshire West and Chester does not lack services, commitment or innovation. Across the borough there is a wide range of provision, supported by strong partnership working and an active VCFSE sector. There are clear examples of effective, community-based and early intervention approaches, including provision for those not in school and programmes supporting key transition points. Many young people report positive experiences when they are able to access the right support, particularly where this is relational, flexible and delivered in trusted environments.

However, these strengths are not yet experienced consistently. Access remains variable, services are not always visible or easy to navigate, and support can still arrive too late. Schools continue to act as the primary access point, while community-based, out-of-hours and locality-based provision - particularly in rural areas - remains more limited. As a result, the system, while rich in provision and partnership, can feel fragmented in practice, with young people often needing to find their way through services rather than support being clearly accessible around them.

The message from young people is clear. They want safe, familiar spaces, trusted relationships, support that fits around their lives, and simple, visible routes into help - before needs escalate.

The opportunity for CWAC is therefore to build on its strong foundations by improving visibility, consistency and access to what already exists. This includes strengthening youth-friendly spaces, extending provision in underserved areas, and ensuring that effective partnership-led models are sustained and delivered at greater scale.

If achieved, this shift will not only improve mental health outcomes, but reduce pressure on statutory services, strengthen community resilience, and ensure that children and young people feel seen, heard and supported at the right time.

Ultimately, this is about trust. A system that young people trust is one they will use early, and one that has the greatest potential to help them thrive.



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Recommendations - Cheshire West and Chester

1. **Strengthen Early Emotional Wellbeing Offer**

- Develop and resource a clearly defined early emotional wellbeing offer for children and young people with emerging or mild–moderate needs, providing accessible, low-threshold support (e.g. drop-ins, youth hubs, community-based and outreach provision)
- Prioritise ages 8–12, early adolescence, and first presentations of anxiety, low mood or emotional dysregulation.
- Expand the Young Hearts Strong Minds programme across all high schools, with sustainable funding in place to ensure consistent delivery. The programme’s focus on the transition age range addresses a key gap in current provision and would strengthen support for young people at a critical stage.
- Ensure early help is available before crisis, exclusion or escalation through increased visibility

2. **Create a visible, youth-friendly emotional wellbeing access model**

- Establish a clear and recognisable way for young people to access emotional wellbeing support, building on existing youth spaces and community venues rather than creating entirely new services.
- Develop a model that could include a central hub, a network of local spaces, and/or a simple online “front door” to help young people know where to go.
- Co-design the approach with children and young people, including the name, look and feel, locations and opening times, to ensure it feels welcoming and relevant.
- Ensure there are clear and simple routes from early help into more specialist support where needed.

3. **Expand Support Beyond School and Beyond Office Hours**

- Increase community-based and out-of-hours emotional wellbeing provision.
- Pilot evening and weekend emotional wellbeing drop-ins linked to youth provision.
- Commission non-school-based support for CYP who are NEET, excluded, home educated, or experiencing EBSA.
- Align youth service evening provision with emotional wellbeing practitioners where possible.
- Move away from fixed session models (e.g. six sessions) to more flexible, person-centred support based on need..



4. **Embed Relational, Trauma-Informed Practice Across the System**

- Adopt relational, trauma-informed, youth-centred practice as a system standard.
- Strengthen workforce training, supervision and reflective practice.
- Prioritise continuity of relationships over time-limited interventions where possible.
- Evaluate services on connection, trust and experience as well as throughput.

5. **Strengthen Neuro-Affirming Emotional Wellbeing Support**

- Ensure emotional wellbeing provision is neuro-affirming, flexible and accessible regardless of diagnosis.
- Provide sensory-aware environments and quieter options.
- Introduce a simple self-assessment framework for services to review how well they currently meet neurodivergent needs, identifying gaps in environments, delivery approaches and accessibility
- Offer 1:1 alternatives alongside group provision.
- Build neurodiversity competence across all emotional wellbeing and youth services.

6. **Address Inequalities in Access (Geography and Transport)**

- Expand local, neighbourhood-based and outreach emotional wellbeing delivery.
- Invest in mobile, pop-up or satellite provision in underserved areas.
- Recognise transport and location as core access issues and explore subsidised transport options.
- Accelerate the Storyhouse/Open Door model, with potential to extend beyond Chester.
- Build partnerships with local businesses (e.g. supermarkets, cafés, and restaurants) to develop more inclusive community spaces, including training staff in youth engagement approaches and linking venues into wider emotional wellbeing support and signposting

7. **Improve Access, Navigation and System Visibility**

- Develop a simple, CYP-friendly emotional wellbeing pathway, including a clear digital front door.



- Replace complex directories with clear, needs-led routes into support.
- Use youth-tested language, visuals and formats.
- Clearly communicate “what happens next” at each stage of support.
- Promote consistently through schools, youth workers and trusted adults.

8. **Strengthen Transition and Continuity (16–25)**

- Improve continuity of emotional wellbeing support across transition points, particularly into adulthood.
- Develop shared transition principles across services/embed the Transition Policy once published
- Enable flexible age ranges where appropriate.
- Support practitioners to plan transitions collaboratively with young people.
- Encourage services to develop formal progression and employment pathways, supporting young people to move into roles such as volunteers, peer mentors or employees, building continuity and strengthening the workforce.

9. **Embed Co-Production with Children and Young People**

- Make co-production a core requirement in commissioning, service design and evaluation.
- Involve CYP in service redesign, recruitment, training and evaluation.
- Ensure feedback loops show how CYP input has influenced change.
- Support participation to be accessible, representative and meaningful.

10. **Strengthen System Coordination and Integration**

- Re-orient existing provision into a coherent, connected system rather than adding new standalone services.
- Support workforce sustainability through longer-term (minimum 3 year) commissioning and shared capacity models.
- Commission for outcomes that reflect prevention, experience and long-term impact.
- Introduce a “No Child Waits Without Support” pledge, ensuring all children and young people receive timely holding support, regular check-ins, or clear signposting while waiting for services.



List of Services

Cheshire West and Chester

14-17 autistic teen social group
Art and Soul Tribe CIC
B U - LGBTQ+
Back on Track (Youth Fed)
Blacon Youth Hub
Bugz and Bunnies CIC
Cafe 71
Chapter Mental Health (West Cheshire)
Chat Health
Cheshire Fire Cadets
Cheshire Young Carers
Choices SEND Youth club
Create Arts
CWAC THOR
CWAC Youth Service
CWP (Cheshire Wirral Partnership)
Cyber Academy (Youth Fed)
Detached youth work
DSN (Deaf and Sensory Network) Youth Vibe
Ellesmere Port Youth Zone - Salvation
army/council
Endorphins (Ellesmere Port, Winsford, Northwich,
Chester, Neston)
Enigma Connect
Family Help and Support Service
Fearless Futures (Blades down)
Flynn's Port in the Storm crisis cafe Ellesmere Port
Groundwork Cheshire
HealthBox
Inspire Her
Kings Trust
Koala North West
Knockout violence (Blades down)
Lache Youth Cafe
Live Cheshire
Live Well CWAC
Malpas Youth Club
MHST's
Mid Cheshire Mind
Navigator service - EH (Northwich, Chester,
Ellesmere Port,
Winsford)
Neston Youth Centre
New Images - Winsford Youth and Community
Forum

Northwich youth zone (council)
Platform for Life (certain areas of Chester)
Polaris Children's Services
Polaris CWAC THOR Team
Radiate Arts Chester
Rage Fitness Wellbeing Group
Recovery College - Involvement, Recovery and
Wellness Centre
Samaritans Northwich
Space4Autism
Starting Well (from 8 children's centres)
Storyhouse
The Link Ellesmere Port (Blades down)
The Venue Community Centre - Northwich
Theatre Porto (all about YP) - Ellesmere Port
Tomorrows Women
Via - New beginnings
Wellbeing Coaching (delivered by chapter and mid
Cheshire mind)
Wildness Tribe CIC
Winsford Men's group
Young Hearts Strong Minds
Your Mind Matters (Youth Fed)
Youth ASB events (Yade)
Youth Fed
Youth Provision LGBTQ+ (the proud trust)- Phoenix
Youth Senate (Youth Council)
Youth Zones



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