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Liverpool

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

On behalf of:



Knowsley Council



WARRINGTON
Borough Council



WIRRAL



Sefton Council

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Foreword

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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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
Chair of Cheshire and Merseyside DCS Forum
Children's Lead for the CEX LCRCA (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority)



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Executive Summary

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

Why this review matters

Children and young people in Liverpool are experiencing rising levels of emotional distress, shaped by high levels of deprivation, inequality and population diversity. Local evidence highlights increasing complexity of need and significant variation in access across neighbourhoods, reflecting and often amplifying national trends.

While Liverpool has a broad and diverse system of support across statutory, education and VCSFE sectors, the system remains complex, difficult to navigate and unevenly experienced. Young people consistently report that support is hard to find, waiting times reduce impact, and help is often only available once issues escalate. Transitions - particularly into adulthood - continue to create disruption and a loss of continuity in care.

What we did

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

- Mapping provision across more than 70 organisations delivering early emotional wellbeing and mental health support
- Engagement with over 150 children and young people across Liverpool
- Input from VCSFE organisations, schools, NHS partners and local authorities
- Analysis of local needs data, policy and best practice

This approach ensures findings reflect both the scale of the system and the lived experience of those navigating it.

What young people told us

Young people's feedback was consistent and clear:

- Support is difficult to find, with low awareness and unclear pathways
- Waiting times are long, often with little or no support in the meantime
- Early help is inconsistent and dependent on school, location or service
- Relationships, trust and feeling understood matter most
- Transitions, particularly at 18, disrupt care and require young people to "start again"

They also highlighted what works: safe, welcoming environments; trusted and consistent adults; creative and activity-based approaches; and flexible support available in community settings and outside traditional hours.



The current system

Liverpool has one of the most extensive early help ecosystems in the region, with a large VCSFE sector, strong youth organisations, embedded school-based support and a wide range of community and digital provision. Many young people report positive experiences when support is accessible and relational.

However, the system is not yet experienced as coherent or consistently accessible.

There are:

- Gaps between the scale of provision and young people's awareness or ability to access it
- Significant variation in access across neighbourhoods
- Limited visibility and complexity in navigating multiple pathways
- Capacity pressures and reliance on short-term funding
- Fragmented provision for 18–25 year olds and ongoing transition challenges

What must change

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

- Strengthen early help and prevention, reducing reliance on crisis thresholds
- Improve visibility, navigation and access through a clearer “front door”
- Expand community-based, outreach and out-of-hours provision
- Address inequalities in access across neighbourhoods and communities
- Improve transition pathways, particularly for 16–25 year olds
- Ensure no young person waits for support without ongoing contact

A call to action

Liverpool has strong partnerships, extensive provision and a clear understanding of what young people need. The challenge now is to connect, coordinate and sustain these strengths so the system feels visible, accessible and reliable in practice.

By building on existing assets and placing young people's voices at the centre, there is a clear opportunity to create a more joined-up, preventative system -where every child and young person can find support early, stay connected to it, and access help that fits their lives and communities.



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Introduction

Children and young people's (CYP) mental health remains one of the most urgent and widely recognised challenges across the country, and Liverpool strongly reflects this picture. CYP emotional wellbeing locally is shaped by a complex mix of social, economic and environmental factors, including high levels of deprivation, inequality and population diversity. Many communities experience additional pressures linked to income, education, housing and wider determinants of health, which directly influence both the level of need and the ability to access support.

Local evidence (such as Joint Strategy Needs Assessment) highlights increasing levels of emotional distress, anxiety and complexity of need, alongside inequalities in how and when young people can access support. This mirrors the national picture, where approximately one in five young people experience a mental health difficulty at any given time, and demand for support continues to grow. In Liverpool, these challenges are often more pronounced, with significant variation between neighbourhoods and a high proportion of children and young people living in areas of significant socioeconomic disadvantage.



**Liverpool Public Health
JSNA documents can be
accessed here**

Liverpool has a broad and diverse early help offer, including statutory and NHS services, school-based provision, Family Hubs, digital platforms and a large voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCSFE) sector. The VCSFE sector plays a particularly significant role in providing flexible, community-based and relational support. The city also demonstrates strong partnership working and system development, including multi-agency collaboration, co-production approaches and an increasing focus on early intervention and prevention.

Despite these strengths, the system continues to face challenges associated with access, capacity and coordination. Long waiting times, threshold-based access, short-term interventions and complexities in navigating services can create gaps in continuity of care. Transitions between children's and adult services present particular challenges, with many young people experiencing a reduction or change in support at key points in their journey, particularly during late adolescence and early adulthood. These challenges are often more acute for neurodivergent young people and those with longer-term or complex needs, who may require more consistent and tailored support.



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This report builds on local and regional work by mapping provision across Liverpool and examining how well current services align with the needs of children and young people. By combining system mapping, local intelligence and engagement with young people, it provides an evidence-based foundation to support the continued development of a more visible, connected and equitable early help system. This approach aligns with national policy direction and the ambitions of the Cheshire & Merseyside Mental Health Plan, alongside local priorities focused on reducing inequalities and improving outcomes for children and young people. Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that CYP can access support that is timely, appropriate and rooted in the communities where they feel most comfortable.

Our ambition is to move toward a system where support is clearly visible, better connected and easier to access, ensuring that children and young people are able to find help when they need it, in the places that feel safe and familiar to them.

A young person friendly version of this report will be available, along with the sub-regional Cheshire & Merseyside report.



Approach

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

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

The work included:

- Mapping and review of local emotional wellbeing and early mental health services, drawing on information from statutory services, VCSFE organisations, schools and community providers. This included analysis of delivery models, access routes, age ranges, outreach activity, digital provision, waiting times, operating hours and funding stability. The mapping covered over 70 organisations across Liverpool, reflecting the scale, diversity and complexity of the local offer and its broad ecosystem, including universal services (e.g. Family Hubs, 0–19 health), youth work, therapeutic provision, creative and cultural programmes, neurodiversity support, identity-specific services and crisis pathways.
- Direct engagement with CYP, including survey responses from over 150 children and young people across Liverpool, alongside wider participation activity through youth groups, community organisations and partner networks. While not fully representative, this dataset provides strong and consistent insight into lived experience, including how young people find and access support, their preferred approaches, and the barriers they face. Responses were analysed thematically and supported by direct quotations to ensure lived experience remains central.
- Targeted inclusion of groups facing additional barriers to support, including neurodivergent young people, those with disabilities, young carers, LGBTQ+ young people, care-experienced young people, and those less likely to engage with formal services. In Liverpool, this also includes young people from culturally diverse backgrounds, including refugee and asylum-seeking communities and those with English as an additional language. Engagement was supported through trusted VCSFE relationships to ensure inclusive and meaningful participation reflective of Liverpool’s diverse population.



- Desk-based analysis of local needs, policy and best practice, drawing on evidence including the Liverpool Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), Public Health reports and wider system intelligence. This was aligned with frameworks such as the NHS 0–25 pathway, iTHRIVE, the National Youth Strategy and Young Futures guidance, alongside local developments such as the CYP Mental Health Support Partnership.

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

Although the work initially centred on physical youth provision, the scope was broadened to include outreach, community-based, home-based and digital support. This reflects how children and young people in Liverpool access support in practice, across schools, community settings, homes, neighbourhood spaces and digital platforms, and recognises that young people often move between services rather than follow a linear pathway.

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

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

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



i-THRIVE Framework



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Children and Young People's Voice

Young people in Liverpool shared a clear, honest and consistent picture of what it feels like to access support for emotional wellbeing and mental health. While their experiences vary, the overall message is remarkably similar: support matters deeply, but it is not always easy to find, access or stay connected to.

Across all responses, young people described the importance of relationships, consistency and feeling understood. When support works well, it is personal, flexible and shaped around their everyday lives. When it does not, it is often experienced as difficult to access, too short to make a difference, or disconnected from their needs. There is a strong sense that the system often responds too late, with many young people feeling they have to reach a crisis point before help becomes available.

Finding help is unclear and inconsistent

Many young people spoke about not knowing what support exists, how to access it or what to expect when they do. Awareness is often reliant on schools or family networks, meaning those without these connections are less likely to find help early.

Some described only becoming aware of services when things had already escalated, while others found the system confusing and difficult to navigate. There was a consistent feeling that services are not designed in ways that feel intuitive or youth-friendly, with multiple pathways, unclear processes and limited visibility.

Experiences of being turned away, not meeting criteria or being referred between services without clear direction reinforced a perception that help can feel conditional, something that is only available once a situation becomes more serious.

**We want help BEFORE breaking
point NOT AFTER!**



Waiting and short-term support reduce impact

Waiting times were one of the most common and challenging issues raised. Young people described long delays between seeking help and receiving it, often with no contact or support in the meantime. This lack of support while waiting was frequently described as one of the hardest parts of the system.

Short-term interventions also limited the impact of support. Many young people described programmes ending just as they were beginning to feel comfortable opening up, creating a sense of being stuck in a cycle of repeating their story without making real progress.

Being passed between services, facing repeated assessments or being told they were “not severe enough” for support left some feeling discouraged and unsure where to turn. Several described their mental health worsening during these gaps or delays.

“Long waiting times... support while waiting would help.”

“It was only a few weeks... just as I got comfortable it ended.”

Early help is variable and dependent on where you go

While early help exists across Liverpool, young people described it as inconsistent and not always easy to access. Positive experiences were often linked to specific settings, such as individual schools, youth hubs or trusted services, rather than the system as a whole.

Access to support frequently depended on where a young person lived, the school they attended or the individual they spoke to. This created variation in both the availability and quality of support, making it feel unpredictable.

Some young people described receiving helpful, responsive support, while others experienced delays, limited follow-up or approaches that felt generic rather than tailored to their needs. This inconsistency made it difficult for young people to rely on the system as a whole.



Relationships and feeling understood matter most

The most valued support was consistently described as relational, consistent and built on trust. Young people emphasised the importance of being listened to, understood and not judged.

Positive experiences were shaped by workers who were kind, approachable and willing to build ongoing relationships. These connections helped young people feel safe enough to open up and engage with support.

In contrast, support felt unhelpful when it was rushed, impersonal or overly clinical. A common frustration was having to repeat their story to multiple professionals, particularly when moving between services or experiencing changes in staff. This disrupted trust and made it harder to engage over time, being described as frustrating, exhausting and at times, a reason for disengaging from support altogether.

"I felt listened to and not judged."

"They helped me understand my feelings and cope."

Young people were clear that trust takes time to build, but can be quickly lost when support ends suddenly, changes without explanation, or lacks continuity.

Transitions and continuity remain a challenge

Continuity of support was a significant concern. Many young people described support ending unexpectedly, workers changing frequently, or being transferred between services without clear communication.

Transitions into adulthood were identified as a particularly difficult point. Many young people described a "cliff edge" at 18, where support changes or stops despite ongoing need. This leaves young people navigating more complex systems independently at a time when continuity and stability are most important.



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Support is not always available when it's needed

Young people consistently highlighted the need for support that matches when they actually need help. Emotional pressures often build during the school day and become most intense after school, in the evenings or at weekends.

However, support is often only available during daytime hours. This mismatch leaves many young people without help at key moments.

Older young people also described the difficulty of needing support at night, when there are very limited options available.

Across all responses, there was a clear and consistent message:

We need help when things actually happen, not just in the day.

Mental health challenges do not follow office hours, and support should not either.



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Strengths

Across Liverpool, many young people described support as helpful and meaningful when it is accessed in the right way. Positive experiences were most often associated with services that provided safe, welcoming environments where they felt able to talk openly, reflect and be understood.

Support delivered through schools, youth hubs and voluntary/community settings was consistently highlighted as working well. Services such as youth groups and local community spaces were valued not just for the support they offer, but for the sense of belonging and connection they create. For many young people, these environments felt familiar and approachable, making it easier to engage.

What stands out most strongly is the importance of relationships. Young people spoke about workers who were kind, understanding and easy to talk to, people who made them feel listened to and taken seriously. This relational approach was often described as the key factor in whether support felt helpful or not. As one young person described, “I felt safe and heard.”

Alongside this, young people consistently valued environments that felt inclusive and non-judgemental, including spaces that are welcoming to LGBTQ+ young people and those with different needs or identities. Support that felt personalised and responsive, rather than generic, was seen as more meaningful and more effective.

Creative and activity-based approaches were also highlighted as a particular strength. Young people spoke about how art, sport and shared activities helped conversations happen more naturally, reducing pressure and making it easier to open up. These approaches, combined with consistent relationships, supported confidence, emotional resilience and coping skills over time.

Overall, young people in Liverpool are clear about what works. They value support that feels safe, flexible and rooted in everyday life, where they can access help in ways that feel comfortable to them. This includes being able to choose how they engage whether in person, online or through drop-in provision, and being supported in environments that feel familiar rather than clinical.



What Young People Want More Of

While many young people have experienced helpful support, they were equally clear about what needs to improve. The strongest message was a need for longer term, more consistent support, rather than short interventions that end before relationships can properly develop. Young people also emphasised the need for more support while they are waiting, rather than being left without contact during periods of delay. Having access to check-ins, group support or informal spaces to talk was seen as an important way to prevent issues escalating and to maintain connection to support.

"Support while on the waiting list would have helped."

There was also a strong call for greater flexibility in how support is delivered over time. Rather than short, fixed programmes, young people wanted support that can continue for as long as it is needed, allowing relationships to develop and progress to be sustained.

"I wish it lasted longer."

Linked to this, many highlighted the value of continuity with the same worker, and longer or more flexible sessions where appropriate, so that they do not have to repeatedly start over but can build trust and make meaningful progress.

Young people also highlighted the importance of greater continuity, particularly being able to see the same worker and avoid repeated assessments.

A stronger understanding of individual needs was also highlighted, particularly in relation to neurodiversity and complex circumstances. Young people emphasised that support should adapt to them, rather than expecting them to fit into existing models.

"More understanding of autism and complex needs."

There was also a clear call for support that is more accessible in terms of both time and place. This includes greater availability outside school hours, as well as more visible, community-based options that are easy to find and access. Across all responses, young people are asking for something relatively simple: **support that is easier to access, more consistent over time, and designed around their everyday lives.**



How Young People Hear About Services

Access to support in Liverpool is strongly influenced by existing connections. Schools, youth hubs and community organisations play a central role in helping young people find out about services, alongside parents and carers.

While these routes work well for some, they also highlight a gap for young people who are less connected to these networks. Many described having little awareness of available services and only discovering support once their needs had escalated. Young people consistently emphasised the need for better visibility and clearer communication. They want simple, youth-friendly information about what support exists, what it does and how to access it.

Suggestions included greater use of social media, more visible information in public spaces, and clearer promotion within communities. Practical ideas included the use of QR codes on buses, in schools and in community venues, enabling young people to quickly and easily access information about available support.

There was also a recognition that informal and community-based support is often more accessible, but not always well advertised, highlighting the need for more consistent and youth-friendly promotion.

Overall, awareness remains a key barrier. Even where strong provision exists, it is not always seen or understood by those who need it most.



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

What makes support feel helpful	What makes support feel unhelpful
Being listened to, taken seriously and feeling heard	Feeling dismissed, ignored or not believed
Kind, approachable and understanding staff who make it easier to open up	Staff who don't understand individual needs (e.g. neurodiversity, culture, complex experiences)
Building trust over time with the same person	Having to repeat their story to multiple people and "start again"
Consistent support and continuity of relationships	Short-term or time-limited interventions that end too soon
Support available in familiar, local places (schools, youth hubs, community spaces)	Long waiting times and no support while waiting
Flexible ways to access support (online, in-person, drop-in)	Support only available at fixed or limited times (e.g. during school hours only)
Practical advice and strategies that feel relevant and usable	Generic or "one size fits all" approaches that don't reflect individual circumstances
Creative and activity-based support that allows conversations to happen naturally	Overly formal or clinical approaches that feel uncomfortable or intimidating
Safe, welcoming and inclusive environments where young people feel they belong	Concerns about confidentiality or not feeling safe enough to open up
Familiar, non-judgemental settings that feel part of everyday life	Not knowing what support exists or how to find it
Ongoing support that adapts as needs change over time	Sudden endings, poor handovers or unclear transitions between services
Feeling supported, reassured and not judged	Being turned away, not meeting thresholds or having to reach crisis to access help



Service Design: What Works Best

Young people in Liverpool consistently favour informal, relationship-based support embedded within everyday environments. They described wanting spaces that feel safe, welcoming and part of normal life, rather than clinical or highly structured models that can feel intimidating or difficult to engage with.

Across responses, there was a strong emphasis on support that feels natural, flexible and built around them. Young people valued being able to talk alongside activities such as art, sport or spending time with others, where conversations can happen without pressure. This approach was seen as more comfortable and easier to engage with than formal settings.

There was also a clear preference for support that recognises and understands identity, including neurodiversity, disability, culture and LGBTQ+ experiences. Young people consistently valued approaches that adapt to individual needs, rather than applying standardised or “one size fits all” models.

Digital and online options were highlighted as an important part of this mix, offering flexibility, privacy and easier access alongside school, work and social life, particularly for those who may struggle with confidence or face-to-face support.

Overall, effective support was described not in terms of specific services, but in how it feels: support works best when it is relational, flexible, non-judgemental and able to build trust over time.

Young people were also clear about what they do not want. The idea of “mental health buildings” was often rejected. Instead, they described wanting youth spaces where support is available when needed, without stigma, pressure or formal barriers, places where they can “just be”, with help available if and when they choose to access it.



What Young People Want Us to Know

Young people shared deeply personal reflections about their experiences of seeking support. Across all responses, there was a clear sense that help can feel difficult to access early, with some feeling they are not taken seriously until their needs escalate. They emphasised the importance of support that recognises the wider context of their lives, including school, relationships, family circumstances and financial pressures, rather than viewing mental health in isolation.

Young people consistently highlighted the need for support that is inclusive, understanding and responsive to identity and lived experience. Where this is present, support feels accessible and meaningful; where it is not, it can lead to disengagement.

Across all engagement, one message stands out clearly:
young people want support that feels safe, human and accessible, in places where they feel comfortable and able to be themselves.

"There needs to be somewhere to just be yourself."

"I felt safe and heard."



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Age-Related Differences

While overall themes were consistent across Liverpool, some differences emerged between age groups, reflecting changes in need, independence and life stage.

Younger children (under 10) were more likely to value support that feels familiar, safe and informal, often preferring trusted adults in settings such as home or school. Play-based, creative and sensory approaches were particularly important in helping them feel comfortable and able to express themselves.

For those aged 10–13, school-based support played a central role. Young people in this group valued access to counsellors, pastoral staff and safe spaces within school, alongside opportunities to build confidence and friendships. However, some began to express frustration where support felt inconsistent or limited.

Young people aged 14–16 often described increased pressure, alongside growing expectations for independence. This group highlighted difficulties accessing timely support, and more frequently described feeling misunderstood or turned away when they needed help.

Older young people (17–25) placed a strong emphasis on transitions and continuity. Many described a “cliff edge” at 18, where support changes or reduces despite ongoing need. They expressed a need for more flexible, age-appropriate provision that reflects adult life, including support with independence, relationships and wider wellbeing.

Despite these differences, the core message remained consistent across all age groups: young people want accessible support, consistent relationships and environments where they feel safe, understood and able to be themselves.



Current Landscape

Liverpool has one of the most extensive early help ecosystems in the region, but it is not yet experienced by young people as a coherent or consistently accessible system. The city demonstrates a strong and well-established commitment to early emotional wellbeing and mental health, supported by an extensive network of statutory, voluntary, school-based and community provision.

This ecosystem is both broad and diverse, spanning early years through to young adulthood (0–25), and includes large-scale organisations (e.g. YPAS, Merseyside Youth Association, LFC Foundation), specialist therapeutic and bereavement services, neurodiversity support, youth hubs, creative and cultural programmes, employability pathways, culturally specific provision and crisis support.

A key strength of the system is its emphasis on open access youth work, relational support and creative engagement, alongside targeted provision for vulnerable groups, including care-experienced young people, young carers, LGBTQ+ young people and those with neurodiversity or additional needs.

Despite these strengths, a defining feature of the Liverpool landscape is the gap between the scale of provision and the extent to which young people are able to navigate, access or recognise it. Young people consistently describe support as “hard to find”, “invisible” or only encountered once needs have escalated. This reflects a critical system tension: while a broad early help offer exists, access is still too often driven by thresholds or crisis, rather than early, visible and consistent engagement.

The system is extensive but complex, with services commissioned and delivered across multiple organisations, funding streams and delivery models. While there is strong partnership working in place, including the CYP Mental Health Support Partnership and joint triage approaches such as “[Liverpool CYPMH digital front door](#)”, pathways can still feel fragmented. From a young person’s perspective, this can result in duplication in some areas and gaps in others, with navigation rarely experienced as straightforward or intuitive.

A particularly strong feature of Liverpool’s system is the embedded partnership between YPAS and education settings, with delivery across both primary and secondary schools. This model provides accessible, consistent and relational support within environments that many young people already trust. Multi-agency working is also a notable strength, including regular MDT (multi-disciplinary team) coordination between services such as YPAS and Alder Hey, supporting more joined-up responses to need. However, this model is not without limitations.



Some young people highlighted that support linked to mental health services within school settings can carry a degree of stigma, which may affect engagement. In addition, a strong reliance on school-based routes can create gaps for those who are not regularly attending or are out of education, employment or training (NEET), who may be less likely to benefit from these pathways. This reinforces the importance of maintaining and expanding open access, activity-based and community provision, which can provide more informal, less stigmatising routes into support.

Liverpool also operates within a context of high deprivation, significant inequalities and wider determinants of wellbeing, including poverty, housing instability, family stress and exposure to trauma. These factors shape both demand for services and how young people experience distress. While provision is extensive, much of it still operates within structured pathways and time-limited interventions, which do not always align with the complexity and continuity of need.

In addition, the local system continues to operate under sustained pressure. Reductions in youth work infrastructure, alongside rising demand and increasing complexity, mean that capacity does not always match need. Many services are working at or beyond capacity, impacting waiting times, workforce stability and continuity of support.

The VCSFE sector plays a central role in the Liverpool system, providing much of the relational, flexible and community-based early help that young people value. However, these services often rely on short-term or project-based funding, which affects stability, long-term planning and the ability to scale provision.

A full service list is provided in the appendix.

Location

Access varies significantly depending on neighbourhood, local infrastructure and the availability of youth spaces.

Young people consistently express a preference for accessing support within their own communities and are less likely to travel across the city. This reflects wider neighbourhood inequalities, with some areas experiencing both higher levels of need and more limited provision.

While central hubs and established services are often more visible and accessible, other neighbourhoods rely on smaller community settings, outreach or detached youth work. Transport cost, accessibility and safety remain barriers, reinforcing the importance of local, walkable provision and contributing to variation in access across the city.



Age ranges covered

Provision in Liverpool broadly spans 0–25, but the level and experience of support varies across different stages of childhood and early adulthood.

0–10: Support is available through Family Hubs, early years services, parent–infant mental health pathways and SEND provision. These services are important for early identification and prevention but are less visible to children themselves and often depend on parental engagement.

11–17: This is the strongest area of provision, with a wide range of school-based support, youth work and community provision. Schools play a central role in access, although increasing demand and complexity mean they are under growing pressure to meet need.

18–25: Provision becomes more fragmented, with fewer clearly defined pathways. While some services extend to 25 (e.g. YPAS, MYA), many offers end at 18, contributing to a widely described “cliff edge”. Young people frequently experience confusion, repeated referrals and reduced continuity at this stage.

There is a growing range of targeted provision for specific groups and transitions, but a fully coherent and consistent 16–25 pathway is not yet established across the system. Positive steps have been taken to improve awareness, including the development of a co-produced animation highlighting available support for young people aged 16+. This provides a strong example of how information can be made more accessible and engaging. There is an opportunity to build on this approach further, extending similar tools across other age groups and embedding them within a wider, coordinated promotion strategy to improve understanding and navigation of the system.

Access and holding support

Services operate through a mixed access model, including open access provision, self-referral routes and professional referral pathways. While this offers flexibility, it also creates variation in how services are accessed, which can make navigation difficult without guidance.

Waiting times vary across the system. Some digital and crisis services offer immediate access, while early help provision may involve shorter waits. However, longer delays remain in specialist and neurodevelopmental pathways.

One example of holding support in Liverpool is the CYPMH Support while waiting site, however a key issue is the inconsistency of holding support during these waiting periods. While some services offer interim support or contact, this is not consistently embedded across the system.



As a result, many young people experience periods without meaningful support while waiting, increasing the risk of escalation or disengagement.

This is compounded by a mismatch between when services are available and when young people need support. Many report needing help during evenings, weekends and moments of emotional escalation, yet most provision remains concentrated within daytime hours.

Together, these challenges highlight an opportunity for greater coordination between services, including more joined-up approaches to providing “while you wait” support. This could include shared models of check-ins, group provision or open access pathways, enabling services to work collaboratively to maintain contact with young people and reduce pressure on individual services.

Visibility of services and partnership working

A central challenge within the Liverpool system is that services are not consistently visible or easy to navigate, despite the breadth of provision available. Young people frequently describe Liverpool as “full of services nobody knows about”, highlighting a gap between availability and awareness.

Promotion is delivered through schools, digital platforms and community networks, but is often limited by capacity, fragmented information and a lack of consistent messaging. This can make it difficult for young people to understand what is available or how to access it.

There are, however, emerging examples of good practice. Creative approaches such as youth-produced zines, collaborative campaigns and events like the NOW Festival demonstrate how services can work together to promote support in ways that are more visible, engaging and youth-friendly. These approaches help simplify information and create opportunities for young people to discover services in informal and accessible ways.

At the same time, Liverpool demonstrates strong partnership working, including multi-agency coordination, joint referral approaches and co-production with young people. These provide a solid foundation for integration, but the system is not yet experienced as fully joined-up in practice.

Liverpool’s growing population diversity, including refugee and asylum-seeking young people and those with English as an additional language, further reinforces the need for accessible, culturally responsive approaches to both support and communication.



Outreach provision

Outreach is a key feature of the Liverpool system, particularly through VCSFE youth work. This includes detached youth work, mobile provision and delivery in informal community settings. These approaches are essential for engaging young people who may not access formal services, particularly those experiencing isolation or disengagement. However, outreach across Liverpool is not consistently coordinated and remains dependent on organisational capacity and funding. Challenges also remain in reaching more hidden or less visible groups, and stakeholders noted that the impact of detached youth work can vary depending on how it is delivered. This highlights the importance of consistent models, workforce capacity and clear pathways into ongoing support.

Within Liverpool, there are examples of effective partnership working, including collaborative outreach approaches where services adapt delivery in response to local need. These approaches demonstrate the value of building relationships in informal settings and connecting young people into wider support.

Learning from other areas also provides useful insight into how outreach can be strengthened. For example, in Cheshire East, coordinated multi-agency outreach models combine detached engagement with structured follow-on support, enabling young people to move more easily from initial contact into sustained provision. This highlights the importance of clear pathways and joined-up working across services.

Mobile provision is another approach used successfully in other areas. Models such as youth buses and community-based mobile hubs provide visible, flexible spaces for support within local neighbourhoods. These approaches help overcome barriers associated with building-based services, enable engagement at times that better reflect young people's lives (including evenings and weekends), and create accessible entry points for those less likely to seek support.

In addition, there are examples nationally of innovative outreach in everyday community settings, such as partnerships with retail or food venues, where staff are supported to create safe and welcoming environments and engage more effectively with young people. Across Liverpool, there is a clear opportunity to build on existing outreach activity by strengthening coordination, improving consistency and sharing effective practice. This could include more joined-up planning of outreach activity, clearer communication about where and when support is available, and stronger pathways into ongoing provision. Together, this would support a more visible, responsive and inclusive outreach offer, particularly for young people who are currently less likely to engage with formal services. and programmes such as MyHappyMind across more schools.



Digital platforms

Liverpool has a growing digital offer, including platforms such as Kooth, Togetherall and CAMHS online resources, alongside co-produced content and engagement campaigns. The Liverpool CYPMH digital front door provides a clearer entry point into services and represents an important step toward a more integrated system. However, there are emerging challenges in how this is experienced in practice. Currently, the platform routes through a CAMHS-branded site, which may shape how it is perceived by young people and families. As CAMHS is often associated with crisis or higher-level intervention, this may act as a barrier to earlier engagement, with some less likely to recognise it as a route into early help and preventative support.

Sites include: <https://www.liverpoolcamhs.com/mental-health-offer/>



Digital support is valued by young people for its flexibility, privacy and accessibility. However, overall provision remains fragmented, with variation in quality, visibility and ease of navigation. Many young people are still unaware of available platforms or do not experience them as a clear route into support.

There is an opportunity to strengthen the role of digital platforms as a genuine “front door” to support. This could include clearer positioning and messaging to emphasise early help, more consistent and youth-friendly branding, and further co-production with young people and families to understand how platforms such as Liverpool CYPMH digital front door are perceived and used. This would help ensure digital pathways are recognised not only as routes into specialist services, but as accessible entry points for early support.

Parent, carer and SEND support

Liverpool offers a broad range of parent, carer and SEND support, including neurodiversity services, family-based interventions and community provision. There is a strong focus on early intervention and whole-family approaches.

However, access can be difficult prior to crisis, and demand for neurodiversity support continues to grow. Young people report gaps in understanding within mainstream settings, particularly in education, highlighting a need for more consistent and inclusive practice across the system.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen how inclusive and accessible support feels across all services, not just those designed specifically for SEND groups. Practical improvements could include creating more sensory-friendly environments (e.g. quiet spaces, flexible lighting, fidget tools or adjusted sessions), increasing staff confidence through neurodiversity-informed training, and offering more flexible approaches such as smaller groups, 1:1 support or adapted sessions.



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Accessible information is also important. Approaches such as 360° virtual tours of buildings, clear visual guides and simple explanations of what to expect can help reduce anxiety and make services easier to access. Tools such as profiling approaches (e.g. Knowing Me) can further support personalised, strengths-based engagement. Together, these practical adjustments can help ensure that support is not only available, but genuinely accessible and inclusive for young people with a wide range of needs.

Additional strengths

Liverpool benefits from a number of distinctive strengths, including a large and diverse VCSFE sector, strong youth-focused organisations, open access youth work and a wide range of creative and community-based provision.

There is a well-established culture of partnership working and co-production, alongside emerging investment and system development activity.

However, many of these strengths remain constrained by short-term funding, workforce pressures and uneven distribution, limiting their overall consistency and sustainability across the city.



What this means for Young People and those who support them

CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Gaps / Actions
Relational and trusted relationships	Strong across VCSFE and youth sector and highly valued by CYP, but inconsistency in staffing, short-term interventions and transitions can disrupt trust	Amber	Sustain and scale relational models; prioritise continuity of workers and reduce short-term interventions
Safe, youth-friendly environments	Strong offer through youth hubs and community provision, but unevenly distributed and not consistently accessible	Amber	Expand local, non-clinical and inclusive spaces, particularly in underserved neighbourhoods
Activity-based support	Well-established strength (arts, sport, youth work, creative provision) and closely aligned to CYP preferences	Amber	Ensure consistent access across all communities and embed within early help pathways
Flexible and timely access	Some evening and weekend provision exists, but most services remain aligned to daytime hours	Amber	Expand out-of-hours provision across therapeutic, early help and community settings
Clear pathways and navigation	Multiple routes exist (including Liverpool CYPMH digital front door), but the system remains difficult to navigate and not consistently visible to CYP	Red	Strengthen awareness and usability of entry points; review how platforms such as digital front door are perceived and accessed; co-produce improvements to support early help, not just crisis access
Holding support while waiting	Good practice exists in some services, but not consistent across the system	Amber	Introduce a shared "holding support" standard so no young person waits without contact or support
Continuity and sustained support	Support is often time-limited, with multiple transitions and repeated assessments	Amber	Move toward flexible, needs-led duration of support with improved handovers and reduced duplication



Inclusive (neurodiversity-informed) support	Strong specialist provision, but inconsistent understanding and delivery in mainstream settings	Amber	Embed neurodiversity-informed practice across all services, not reliant on diagnosis alone
Local access and transport	Strong preference for hyper-local support; access varies by neighbourhood with transport barriers for some CYP	Amber	Expand neighbourhood-based provision, strengthen outreach and consider subsidised or supported transport options
Transitions (16–25)	Wide range of services exists, but pathways are fragmented and poorly understood; cliff edge at 18 remains	Red	Develop a coherent, visible 16–25 pathway with continuity across life stages
NHS experience	Mixed experience; high thresholds, long waits and limited relational continuity	Red	Improve integration with VCSFE support and reduce reliance on threshold-based access
Visibility and awareness of services	Services widely available but frequently described as “hard to find” or “invisible” by CYP	Red	Improve system-wide promotion using schools, communities, digital platforms and public spaces
Timing of support vs need	Significant mismatch between when need occurs and when services are available	Red	Align service delivery with real-life patterns of need (evenings, weekends and crisis points) with a clear shared timetable easily accessible to view.
Inequality and wider determinants	High deprivation and wider life pressures strongly shape wellbeing and access to support	Red	Strengthen links between emotional wellbeing services and wider family, community and early help support; ensure services respond to the wider context of young people’s lives
Workforce capacity and sustainability	System under pressure; services operating at capacity with reliance on short-term funding	Amber	Invest in longer-term funding (e.g. 3–5 years) and workforce development across sectors



Conclusion

This report highlights a system in Liverpool that is rich in provision and strong in ambition, but not yet consistently experienced as accessible, visible or responsive by the children and young people it is designed to support. The central issue is not a lack of services, but the challenge of how those services connect, align and operate together across a complex system.

A defining message throughout is the gap between what exists and what young people experience. Support is often described as helpful when it is accessed, yet too many young people struggle to find it, understand it, or reach it at the right time. For many, support is still encountered only once needs have escalated, reinforcing a system that feels reactive rather than preventative, and shaped by thresholds and pathways rather than individual need.

Across all engagement, young people's expectations are clear and consistent. They are not asking for more services or complexity, but for a system that is easier to navigate, more relational, and aligned with their everyday lives, where support is visible, timely and built on relationships that last. Their feedback points toward a clear direction of travel:

- support should be easier to find and understand
- relationships should be prioritised over short-term or transactional interventions
- provision should reflect when young people actually need help, not just when services are open
- and continuity should be maintained, particularly at key transition points such as the move into adulthood

Importantly, this report also demonstrates that many of the building blocks for improvement already exist within Liverpool's system. The city benefits from a strong and diverse VCSFE sector, established partnerships, innovative models such as school-based provision and digital access routes, and a wide range of community-based and creative support. However, these strengths are not yet experienced as a coherent or consistent offer. Fragmentation, uneven visibility and short-term funding continue to limit the overall impact of provision.

The most significant challenges are therefore ones of integration, accessibility and sustainability. Without clearer pathways, stronger coordination and longer-term investment, even high-quality provision will continue to feel inconsistent and difficult to access. These challenges are most visible in areas where young people experience the system most acutely, navigating between services, accessing support locally, receiving help outside traditional hours, and moving from children's to adult provision.



Looking ahead, the opportunity for Liverpool is not to redesign the system from the ground up, but to strengthen, connect and scale what already works. This means making support easier to find, ensuring young people are not left without help while waiting, improving continuity across services and life stages, and embedding relational, community-based models at the centre of early help. It also requires aligning provision more closely with the realities of young people's lives, including the wider inequalities and pressures that shape their wellbeing.

The risk is not the absence of provision, but that, without change, it will continue to work unevenly, effective for some, but inconsistent for many. The opportunity is to build a system that works reliably and equitably for every young person, in every community. Liverpool has the foundations of a strong and preventative system. The next step is to ensure that this system feels visible, connected and dependable to those who rely on it, so that every young person knows where to go, feels welcomed when they get there, and can access support before reaching crisis.

As one young person put it:

**We just need something that's there when
you actually need it.**



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Recommendations - Liverpool

1. **Strengthen a clear, youth-friendly front door to support**

While platforms such as Liverpool CYPMH digital front door provide a strong foundation, they are not yet widely recognised or experienced as a single, clear entry point.

There is an opportunity to strengthen the visibility and usability of existing digital routes so that they function as a genuine front door for young people. This includes clearer promotion across schools, communities and public spaces, and ensuring information is simple, consistent and co-produced with young people themselves.

2. **Align support with when young people need it most**

Expand out-of-hours emotional wellbeing provision, to include evening and weekend access across youth hubs, community venues and digital platforms, drop-in and open access options and crisis-adjacent early help support. This should prioritise community-based settings where young people already feel comfortable.

3. **Strengthen neighbourhood and outreach provision**

Invest in neighbourhood-based delivery models, including expanding local youth hubs and “micro-spaces” in high-need areas, strengthening detached and outreach youth work, and ensuring delivery through trusted community venues (libraries, schools, faith spaces). This should reduce postcode inequality and increase early engagement.

4. **Embed a consistent “holding support” model across the system**

Introduce a city-wide holding support standard, including:

- regular check-ins during waiting periods
- access to group-based and drop-in support
- clear guidance and resources for self-help
- named contacts where appropriate

Ensuring no young person should be left without support while waiting.



5. Prioritise continuity and relationships across services

Shift from time-limited, programme-based models to flexible, needs-led support duration, alongside reduced duplication in assessments, improved handovers and “warm transitions”, and a focus on relationship-based practice. This should be reflected in commissioning and service design.

6. Develop a coherent and integrated 16–25 pathway

Liverpool already has a range of 16–25 provision, but it is not experienced as a coherent offer. There is an opportunity to bring these services together into a clearly defined pathway, supported by consistent messaging and navigation.

This should include stronger links between mental health support, employability, mentoring and life skills, reflecting the wider needs of young adults.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen progression routes within services, enabling young people to move beyond receiving support into roles such as volunteers, peer mentors or paid staff. Embedding clearer pathways back into services in this way can support recovery, build confidence and provide valuable employment and development opportunities, while strengthening the sustainability and relatability of provision.

7. Strengthen neurodiversity-informed and inclusive practice

While specialist provision exists, mainstream settings do not consistently apply inclusive approaches. Embedding neurodiversity-informed practice across the whole system, including schools, youth settings and early help, will improve accessibility and reduce reliance on diagnosis as a gateway to support. This should include:

- workforce training
- increased availability of sensory-friendly environments
- greater consistency between specialist and mainstream provision

8. Invest in workforce capacity, skills and stability

Longer-term, more stable funding, particularly for the VCSFE sector, is essential to maintaining trusted relationships and ensuring consistency. Alongside this, there is a need to invest in training, retention and cross-sector learning between clinical and community services. A stable, skilled workforce is fundamental to delivering the relational support young people value.



This should be done through:

- long-term, sustainable funding for VCSFE and youth provision (e.g. 3–5 year funding cycles)
- improved pathways for training and retaining youth and mental health practitioners
- recognition of youth work as a key part of the mental health system

9. Improve system coordination and reduce fragmentation

Improving coordination across services, through clearer pathways, shared processes and better communication will reduce duplication and ensure that young people do not fall between thresholds. The focus should be on making the system feel coherent and connected, including:

- clearer shared pathways and referral processes
- improved information sharing and communication between services
- reduced duplication and gaps
- stronger alignment between statutory, VCSFE and community provision

There is also an opportunity to strengthen how information about services is shared across the system. This could include developing and maintaining youth-friendly directories or shared service lists, building on existing mapping work, to support consistent signposting across GPs, schools, family hubs and community providers. Ensuring these resources are clear, up to date and accessible to both professionals and young people would help improve navigation, awareness and coordination across the system.

10. Strengthen prevention by addressing wider determinants of wellbeing

Strengthening early help requires continued alignment with broader prevention agendas, including Family Hubs, education, youth provision and community services. Supporting children and young people earlier, and in the contexts that shape their lives, is essential to reducing long-term need and addressing inequalities. Embed mental health within a wider prevention framework should include:

- stronger integration with Family Hubs, schools and community services
- support for families and parental mental health
- investment in safe spaces, activities and community infrastructure
- alignment with Marmot principles and inequality reduction strategies



List of Services - Liverpool

Activ 8
ADDvanced Solutions
Community Network
Alfie's squad
Al-Ghazali Centre
Amparo Cheshire & Merseyside
Anfield Community Arts
Anfield Sports Community Centre
Barnardo's Action with Young carers
Bobby Colleran
Breckfield & North Everton Neighbourhood Council Ltd
Bully busters
Career connect (also in LCR)
Catch22 Charity Limited
City of Liverpool Sea cadets
Collective Encounters
Comic Youth
Community Youth Services
Compass
Create Arts
Croxteth Gems
Daisy Inclusive
Deaf Active
Dynamic Support
Edge Hill Youth & Community Centre (EHYCC)
Everton in the Community – The Blue Base (L4)
Everton In The Community (The Peoples Hub)
EYPP (Ellergreen Young Persons Project)
FireFit Hub
Garston Adventure Playground GFS (Girls Friendly Society)
Girls with Dreams
Granby Toxteth Development Trust (GTDT)
Greenbank Sports Academy and Greenbank College
Growing Sudley
Gyro/Action Youth (trans health)
Harthill Youth Club
ILC / Pars Community Kinship care
Kitty's Laundrette (also talk and learn space and events)
Liverpool 6 (L6) Community Association
Liverpool LFC Foundation (Citywide)
Life Rooms community offer
Liverpool City Council -Youth Service
Liverpool Light Crisis Cafe
Liverpool Lighthouse
Liverpool Queer Minds
Mary Seacole House
Marybone Youth Centre
Merseyside Play Action Council
Merseyside Somali And Community Association (MSCA)
Merseyside Youth Association
Methodist Centre Youth Centre
Netherley youth and community initiative (NYCI)
Neurodiverse Family Support
New Horizons
Norris Green Community Alliance
Norris Green Youth Centre
OakLeaf
Positive Futures
Liverpool Positive Pathways
Priority Youth Project
PSS
Rainbow Trust Children's Charity
Rhys Jones Community Centre
Rice Lane City Farm
Spectrum Gaming
Speke Venny,
Speke Adventure Playground
Sports Alive
St Cyril's Children and Young People - SCCYP
The Bronte Centre
The Central Youth Club
The Gordon (Kirkdale Neighbourhood Council)
The Greenhouse Project
The Nest (Seans Place) for males
The Shewsy Youth Club
The Unity Youth Club
The Valley Community Theatre
Tiber Project
Togetherall (Liverpool Hope University)
Toxteth Town Hall Community Resource Centre (L8)
Triple C
Vauxhall Millenium Resource Centre
Walton Youth & Community Project
Woodlands Community Centre
Young Person Advisory Service (YPAS)
4Wings



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