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Wirral

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



Liverpool City Council



WARRINGTON
Borough Council



HALTON
BOROUGH COUNCIL



Cheshire West
and Chester



Cheshire East
Council



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
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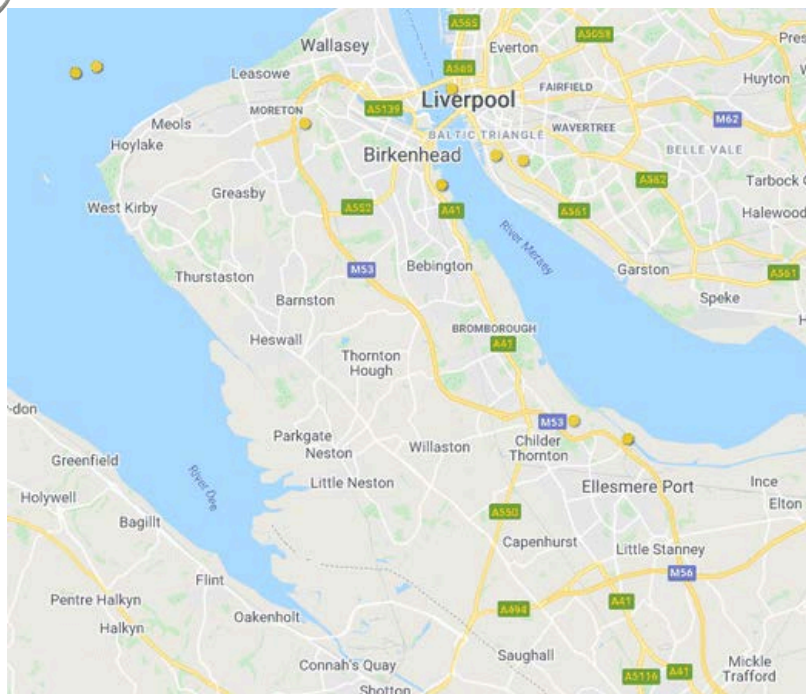


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Executive Summary

This report has been developed as a complementary Wirral place-based analysis to the wider Cheshire & Merseyside Early Mental Health System Review. It brings together service mapping, local intelligence, partner perspectives and, most importantly, the voices of children and young people (CYP) to assess how effectively the current emotional wellbeing and early mental health system meets local need.

Why this review matters

Children and young people in Wirral are experiencing increasing levels of emotional distress, consistent with national trends but shaped by local inequalities, deprivation, neurodevelopmental need, family circumstances and experiences of trauma. Local evidence highlights growing demand on mental health services, increasing presentations in crisis, and significant numbers of children who require support but do not meet existing service thresholds.

At the same time, Wirral benefits from a strong foundation of support, including a well-established voluntary and community sector, innovative digital solutions such as Branch, and emerging models such as the Joy Building, which bring clinical and non-clinical support together in youth-friendly environments. The challenge is not a lack of provision, but ensuring support is visible, consistent, connected and accessible before needs escalate

What we did

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

- Mapping and review of 71 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across Wirral
- Direct engagement with more than 600 children and young people through surveys and listening sessions
- Input from VCSFE organisations, health partners and local authorities
- Targeted engagement with groups less likely to access support, including neurodivergent young people, young people with disabilities and marginalised communities
- Analysis of local needs assessments, national policy and emerging best practice

This approach ensured the findings reflect both lived experience and a practical understanding of how the system currently operates



What young people told us

Young people's feedback was clear and consistent:

- Support often ends before trust and relationships have been fully established
- Help is frequently difficult to access early, with some young people feeling they must reach crisis point before support is available
- Waiting times and eligibility thresholds can worsen distress and reduce confidence in services
- Being listened to, treated with kindness and feeling understood matters more than the type of service being accessed
- Young people want safe, informal and non-clinical spaces where they can access support when they are ready
- Schools are important sources of support but cannot meet all emotional wellbeing needs on their own
- Neurodivergent young people often feel misunderstood and want services that are more sensory-aware and responsive to individual needs
- Continuity, trust and long-term relationships are more important than short-term interventions

Young people also highlighted what works well: trusted adults, welcoming environments, creative and activity-based approaches, flexibility, and support that connects wellbeing to everyday life, community, interests and purpose. Overall, they want earlier intervention, easier access and support that feels personal rather than transactional.

The current system

Wirral has many strengths within its emotional wellbeing offer. The borough benefits from strong partnership working, a collaborative relationship between statutory and voluntary sectors, and a broad range of community-based support. Innovative developments such as Branch, The Hive, Open Door, Future Yard and the Joy Building demonstrate a commitment to delivering support in ways that are accessible, youth-friendly and non-stigmatising. The system is particularly strong in digital navigation, partnership working, creative approaches and support for young adults aged 16–25.

However, several challenges remain:

- Early help provision for younger children, particularly aged 5–10, is less visible and often reliant on school, SEND or statutory pathways
- Awareness and visibility of available support remains inconsistent
- Access to emotional wellbeing support outside school hours varies across the borough
- Short-term funding arrangements impact sustainability, workforce stability and continuity of relationships
- Some young people continue to experience difficulties navigating services and repeating their story



-
- Transport and accessibility remain barriers for some communities
 - Neurodiversity-informed practice is strong in some services but not consistently embedded across the system

As a result, while Wirral has many examples of excellent practice, young people's experiences can still vary depending on where they live, what they know about available support and the pathway through which they enter the system

What must change

To build on Wirral's strengths and create a more consistent experience for children and young people, the evidence highlights the need to:

- Strengthen prevention and early intervention, particularly for children aged 5–10 and their families
- Ensure no child or young person is left without support while waiting for services
- Expand access to youth-friendly, community-based out-of-hours support
- Embed neurodiversity-affirming and inclusive practice across all services
- Improve awareness and promotion of available support beyond digital routes

The focus should be on embedding and scaling what already works well, rather than creating entirely new structures or services.

A call to action

Wirral is not starting from a position of deficit. The borough is already demonstrating many of the characteristics of a high-performing emotional wellbeing and early mental health system, with strong partnerships, innovative services, courageous commissioning, and a thriving VCSFE sector working alongside statutory partners. Through developments such as Branch, and Joy, Wirral is emerging as an exemplar across Cheshire and Merseyside for delivering youth-centred, accessible and preventative support.

What stands out is not simply the range of provision available, but a collective willingness to work differently. Wirral has embraced collaboration, trusted partnerships and innovative models that bring clinical and community support together in ways that reflect what children and young people say they need. The challenge now is to build on these strengths and ensure that the best of Wirral is experienced consistently by every child and young person. This means strengthening equity of access, improving continuity through key transitions, embedding innovative practice across the whole system, and ensuring support is available before needs escalate.

The foundations are firmly in place. By continuing to build on its strong culture of partnership, co-production and forward-thinking commissioning, Wirral is well positioned to become a leading example of how emotionally intelligent, connected and preventative systems can support children and young people to thrive



Introduction

Children and young people's emotional wellbeing in Wirral is shaped by a complex mix of social, economic and place-based factors. The borough includes densely populated urban communities alongside more affluent and semi-rural areas, with significant variation in deprivation, opportunity and access to support. Evidence from Wirral's Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategic Needs Assessment highlights clear and longstanding inequalities, with emotional distress closely linked to wider determinants such as poverty, family circumstances, exposure to trauma, neurodevelopmental need, and educational experience.

The 2022 strategic needs assessment identified that emotional and mental health challenges are emerging early, with indicative school-based data suggesting that around 30% of primary-aged children in Wirral may require support beyond standard pastoral care, and that a proportion fall between service thresholds. Wirral also experiences significantly higher rates of self-harm among 10–24-year-olds than the national average, alongside increasing presentations to emergency departments for mental-health-related crises. These patterns reflect both national trends and a local system under sustained pressure.

Positively, Wirral has a broad and vibrant emotional wellbeing offer, spanning schools, early years services, health provision and a strong voluntary and community sector. The borough has already committed to transformation through the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Transformation Programme, including ambitions to improve coordination, development of a Single Point of Access, strengthen prevention and ensure children and young people can find the right help sooner. Digital platforms such as Zillo, Branch and Family Toolbox, alongside community based provision including open access and targeted services, represent important strengths within the local system.

Transition points - particularly movement between primary and secondary school, and from children to adult services - are identified as periods of heightened risk, with continuity of support frequently disrupted. Neurodevelopmental assessment waiting times, increasing demand on CAMHS, and growing reliance on schools to hold unmet need reinforce the importance of strong, accessible early help and non clinical emotional wellbeing support.

This report builds on Wirral's existing strategic foundation by bringing together local data, system intelligence and the lived experiences of children and young people. It maps current emotional wellbeing and early mental health provision across the borough and compares it directly with what children and young people say they need in practice.



By aligning system design with lived experience, the report identifies opportunities to strengthen early intervention, improve access, and reduce escalation into crisis. The ambition is clear: to support Wirral in continuing its journey towards a visible, connected and equitable emotional wellbeing system, where help is easy to find, relationships are sustained, and children and young people can access the right support, in the right place, at the right time - long before crisis becomes the only option.



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:



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- Mapping and review of 71 emotional wellbeing and early mental health services across the Wirral
- Direct engagement with over 600 CYP through surveys and a listening session in The Hive Youth Hub
- 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:

Term	Definition
Youth Hub	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 threshold for entry.
Emotional Wellbeing / Early Mental Health Support	Support for mild to moderate needs offered before issues escalate, aligning with the "Getting Advice" and "Getting Help" elements of the i-THRIVE framework. 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. Needs can also fluctuate, reflecting the complexity of the need for flexible, joined-up responses across the system.
Family Hubs	Services that bring together support for whole family needs. This could include LA or VCSFE community hubs. Youth hubs are distinct from Family Hubs; however, this work considers how youth hubs connect with Family Hubs, schools, and wider community services.



Children and Young People's Voice

It is important to note that the findings below reflect the views and experiences of the children and young people who participated in this engagement activity and may not be representative of all young people in Wirral. While there are a number of established routes into early emotional wellbeing and mental health support locally, the themes presented reflect how support is experienced and perceived by those who chose to share their views as part of this review.

Key themes included:

Support Often Ends Too Soon

A recurring frustration is that support stops just as trust is built, leaving young people feeling abandoned or worse off. Short-term models can undo progress and increase distress, especially for children with trauma or ongoing needs.

**Once you get used to them, it stops
and you have to start again**

Feeling Listened To Matters More Than the Service

Young people consistently describe that how they are treated matters more than the service name with trust, kindness and being taken seriously are the defining factors of a “helpful” service.

**They were non-judgemental
and empathetic**

**That I could just speak without
anyone judging**



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Waiting and Thresholds Make Things Worse

Delays and eligibility criteria were described as actively harmful, particularly when no support was offered whilst waiting, which means some young people feel forced to deteriorate to be taken seriously, reinforcing crisis-led access.

Strong Desire for Safe, Informal, Youth-Friendly Spaces

Clinical environments were often described as intimidating. Young people want spaces that feel normal, calm and welcoming.

What young people want in Wirral:

- Play games or sports
- Do art, music or drama
- Chill out with friends
- Learn new skills or hobbies
- Talk to someone when ready

**I always get rejected for help.
They say I don't meet the
criteria**

**Somewhere safe and chill where
you can talk.....Not like a hospital**

Neurodivergent Young People Often Feel Misunderstood by Services

Many Wirral young people identified as autistic, having ADHD, sensory processing difficulties, or other neurodivergent needs and described experiences of support that did not always understand or respond to their needs effectively. Young people reported feeling misunderstood by professionals and school staff, difficulties accessing support without a formal diagnosis, and a lack of provision that recognised the impact of neurodiversity on emotional wellbeing. Some highlighted a lack of SEND-specific support opportunities and concerns that school staff did not always recognise or understand their needs.

**Youth groups are too loud and
overwhelming for me**

**I'm neurodivergent and they
thought I was just being
difficult.**



Several young people also described practical barriers to engagement, including youth groups and activities that felt too noisy, busy or overwhelming, alongside a desire for quieter environments, sensory-aware approaches and more flexible ways to access support

Schools Are Important - But Can't Do Everything

School-based support is often the first access point and is highly valued by children and young people, but capacity and flexibility can be limited. This highlights the importance of a wider network of emotional wellbeing support available across communities, services and settings, as well as whole school approaches..

She was kind, but there wasn't enough time

What Young People Want More Of

Young people's feedback points towards a clear set of priorities for strengthening emotional wellbeing support in Wirral:

- Earlier access to support before problems escalate
- Longer-term support that does not end as soon as trust is established
- More support while waiting for specialist services
- Adults who listen, understand and take concerns seriously
- Greater choice and flexibility in who they speak to
- More support that understands neurodiversity, sensory needs and disability
- Face-to-face support alongside digital options
- More opportunities to access support outside school hours
- Safe, welcoming spaces where they can relax, socialise and seek help when ready
- Clearer information about what support is available and how to access it

Several young people also highlighted the importance of having support that feels personalised rather than standardised, with interventions tailored to individual circumstances, interests and needs.



What Works Well	What is unhelpful
Staff being kind, approachable and non-judgemental	Long waiting times before support becomes available
Feeling listened to and understood	No support whilst waiting
Relationships being consistent over time	Support ending too quickly or being limited to a small number of sessions
Support being delivered by the right person at the right time	Having to repeat their story to different professionals
Sessions providing practical coping strategies and advice	Being told they did not meet service criteria
Support being flexible and adapted to individual needs	Not receiving help until problems had reached crisis point
Young people feeling safe enough to talk openly	Being matched with a professional who did not understand their needs

What Young People Want Support Spaces to Look Like

When asked about activities and environments, young people consistently described wanting places that combine wellbeing support with opportunities to socialise, relax and take part in activities.

Popular suggestions included:

- Art, music and creative activities
- Sport and physical activity
- Games and gaming
- Learning new skills and hobbies
- Quiet spaces to relax
- Opportunities to make friends
- Informal conversations with trusted adults
- Sensory-friendly spaces
- Support available alongside everyday activities rather than in formal clinical settings

The feedback suggests that young people often see activities, relationships and wellbeing support as interconnected rather than separate offers.



How Young People Find Support

The responses suggest that schools remain one of the most common routes into emotional wellbeing support, particularly for younger children. However, many young people also identified:

- Parents and family members
- Friends and peers
- Youth workers
- Community and youth organisations

as important sources of support. Whilst school-based support is highly valued, the feedback suggests young people want a broader range of visible and accessible options beyond school, particularly during evenings, weekends and holidays.

Young people suggested service names such as:

- Sanctuary
- Safe Word
- The Haven
- Creative Calm
- Place to be You
- Free to Be
- Youth-phoria
- The Nest



Don't wait until I am in crisis to listen



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Current Landscape

Strengths

Wirral benefits from a broad and diverse emotional wellbeing offer for children, young people and families, underpinned by strong collaborative partnerships, innovative and forward-thinking commissioning, trusted VCSFE leadership, effective integration with schools and Family Hubs, and multiple non-stigmatising routes into support, including youth provision, arts, digital, sport and peer-based approaches. A list of those reviewed can be found at the end of this report.

Advanced digital navigation and system triage

Wirral is ahead of many areas nationally in digital navigation for CYP emotional wellbeing. Branch operates as a single front door with integrated triage and matching across CYPHMS (My Mind), early help and VCSE provision. The key opportunity is strengthening system-wide alignment, promotion and use of Branch data to inform strategic planning. Wirral has several strong, family-friendly digital resources, including Family Toolbox, Zillo and Sandbox. A particular strength of these platforms is their accessibility and user-centred design, with language, content and visuals tailored to children and young people. This contrasts with some areas where online resources can feel more professionally focused and less engaging for younger audiences.

Strong cross system trust and collaboration

Wirral demonstrates a high level of trust and collaboration between commissioners, NHS services and the voluntary sector, including a willingness to take positive, values-led risks. This enables services to work differently rather than in parallel, helping to break down traditional boundaries between clinical and non-clinical support. The Future In Mind Group is a positive example of this approach, bringing together youth providers and representatives from education, health, social care and other partner organisations to improve the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people in Wirral. The group played an important role in shaping and supporting the development of Branch, helping to strengthen collaboration and create a more joined-up system of support.

This collaborative approach is exemplified by the Joy Building, where CYPHMS teams will operate from a voluntary-sector-led, creative community space rather than traditional clinical estates. The blended model brings together clinical, non-clinical, cultural and creative support in a welcoming, non-stigmatising environment that young people actively choose to engage with. This represents structural culture change, embedding clinical support within community life rather than positioning it apart from it.



Place-based, asset-led approaches that build belonging and purpose

Wirral's strongest interventions increasingly focus on belonging, identity, confidence and purpose as core protective factors for emotional wellbeing. These approaches align with trauma-informed and youth development evidence, engage young people who may avoid traditional "mental health services", and address wider determinants such as loneliness and exclusion.

This is evidenced through initiatives such as the Joy Building, Future Yard, which links emotional wellbeing support with real employment, skills and creative pathways; and youth-focused neighbourhood spaces (e.g. Hive Youth Zone) that anchor support within everyday community life. This demonstrates an understanding that early help is not only about support, but about opportunity and connection.

VCSE and statutory roles are distinct but complementary

Wirral benefits from a mature balance between voluntary, community and statutory roles. VCSFE organisations lead on delivery, relationships and accessibility, while statutory services maintain oversight through triage, safeguarding and commissioning. This division of strengths appears healthier than in systems where one sector dominates, creating the conditions for innovation grounded in prevention and trust.

This is evidenced by VCSFE leadership in creative, youth-led and relational spaces (e.g. the Joy Building), alongside statutory oversight of single points of access such as Branch and safeguarding arrangements. This model relies on sustained trust and stable funding to remain effective.

Commitment to Young Adults (16-25)

Wirral demonstrates a clear commitment to a smoother transition pathway for those aged 16-25, not only through existing services such as via Open Door and Future Yard, but also with plans for a Young Adults Service being led by Local Authority colleagues.



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Availability of Support Outside School Hours

Children and young people consistently told us that they would value access to support beyond the school day, particularly during evenings and weekends. The Hive is a positive example of this approach, offering both weekend provision and family-based sessions. Expanding access to support outside traditional working and school hours, where possible, would help services better meet the needs and preferences of children, young people and families.

Neighbourhood Youth Model

The Neighbourhood Youth Model (Youth & Play) provides a positive example of place-based, community-focused support, with youth workers delivering provision across all nine Wirral neighbourhoods. By using existing community assets, such as libraries and community venues, the model creates accessible opportunities for young people to socialise, participate in positive activities, build relationships and access support within their local communities. Continued co-production with young people regarding the location and design of provision will be important to ensure these spaces remain accessible, attractive and relevant to the communities they serve.



System Challenges and Opportunities

Opportunity to Strengthen Early Help for Younger Children (5-10)

Wirral has a strong and well-developed offer for adolescents and young adults, including a range of creative, community-based and open-access support models. There is an opportunity to build on these strengths by further developing emotional wellbeing support for younger children and their families, particularly those in the early primary years.

Currently, many younger children access emotional wellbeing support through schools, SEND services or statutory pathways. Whilst these routes play an important role, there may be scope to further expand community-based, non-clinical approaches for younger children and families, helping to strengthen prevention and early intervention before needs escalate.

Further development of family-centred, community-based and creative wellbeing provision for younger age groups could complement existing strengths within the system and support Wirral's ambition to provide the right help at the earliest possible opportunity.

Joining Up Services at Transition Points

Wirral has a strong range of services available for young adults and a clear commitment to improving support for 16-25 year olds. As young people move through key life stages, it will be important to ensure clear transition arrangements are in place so that support remains continuous and young people do not experience a "cliff edge" when they reach adulthood.

There is also an opportunity to build on existing strengths by developing more structured pathways into volunteering, peer mentoring, training and employment for young people approaching 18. Examples such as Open Door's Bizarre programme demonstrate how these opportunities can support personal development, strengthen community connections and promote smoother transitions into adulthood.

Where support is ending, whether due to age thresholds, service eligibility or discharge, young people should be linked to appropriate onward support and clear transition pathways to maintain continuity and reduce the risk of falling between services. Consideration should also be given to the role of MHSTs and other school-based services in supporting transitions from school into college, training, employment or NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) pathways, ensuring young people continue to receive timely and appropriate support during periods of change



Impact of short-term funding

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.

Promotion of Services

Whilst Branch is a significant strength within the Wirral system, providing a sophisticated digital triage and matching function for children and young people (CYP), it is important that digital routes are complemented by a range of other access points and ways of finding support. This is particularly relevant when considering digital poverty, differing levels of confidence using online platforms, and the variety of ways in which CYP choose to seek help.

During the consultation, many young people told us they would like to hear about available support more regularly rather than through one-off awareness campaigns. Suggestions included the use of QR codes on buses and in community settings, alongside animations and other youth-friendly promotional approaches. Effective navigation also relies on services having a good understanding of one another and being able to confidently signpost young people to appropriate support. This is particularly important where a service is operating at capacity or may not be the best fit for a young person's needs.

A positive example shared during the consultation involved a young person attending counselling through Pilgrim Street Arts Centre being signposted to The Hive, where they were subsequently able to access additional peer support opportunities.

Whilst full MHST coverage is expected by 2029, school-based provision alone is unlikely to meet the needs of all CYP. Eligibility criteria, capacity constraints, attendance difficulties, exclusion, elective home education and personal preferences may all affect access. Strengthening awareness of the wider local offer, alongside clear pathways between services, will help ensure CYP can access timely and appropriate support regardless of their point of entry into the system. Whole-school approaches such as myHappyMind can further support prevention and early intervention by promoting emotional literacy, resilience and wellbeing across entire school communities.



Whilst promoting the breadth of available support is important, consideration should also be given to avoiding an overwhelming number of options. Branch plays a valuable role in helping CYP identify the most appropriate service for their needs. Other approaches being used across the region, including co-produced zines and Z-cards, may also offer accessible and practical ways of raising awareness of local services and support pathways.

Transport and Accessibility

Some children and young people identified transport as a barrier to accessing support and highlighted the importance of considering transport links and accessibility when designing and delivering services. This was particularly noted in areas that may be perceived as more affluent, where services can be geographically dispersed and public transport options may be more limited. Consideration should be given to ensuring support is accessible for all children and young people, regardless of where they live or their ability to travel independently.

SEND support

Given that CYP have told us that they don't always feel understood by services, and that 47.9% of those seeking support via the Branch site had a SEND need, it is important, not only that there are enough services to support those with SEND needs without requiring a diagnosis, but there also remains a clear need to strengthen SEND and neurodiversity awareness across existing services. This could include:

- 360° building tours
- Staff training
- Pastoral support for children and young people. A strong example of this can be seen at Storyhouse in Chester, where a pastoral member of staff meets with children and young people prior to attendance to understand their needs, make any necessary adjustments, and help them feel comfortable engaging with the service. Ongoing support is then available for those who choose to continue attending, helping to build confidence, maintain engagement and create a positive experience.
- Sensory-aware environments
- 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)

It is positive that work is underway to develop a Neurodiversity Hub in Wirral, demonstrating a commitment to improving support and coordination for neurodivergent children and young people.



Outreach

Whilst the Neighbourhood Model is a significant strength and provides an excellent example of place-based youth provision using a range of community assets, there is an opportunity to further develop outreach approaches to reach children and young people who may be less likely to attend community venues independently or engage with existing provision, particularly those who are not in education, experience barriers to attending structured activities, or are less visible to services.

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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Emerging Priorities

Several areas of focus for ongoing development and prevention activity were identified through consultation with local professionals, including social media, sleep, diet, worry and anxiety. Consultation also highlighted an opportunity to further explore how the emotional wellbeing and mental health offer can engage boys and young men. Whilst some male-focused support is available locally, there may be value in considering whether additional targeted engagement or provision could help ensure the needs of boys and young men are fully understood and addressed.



Wirral is demonstrating significant strengths in digital innovation and partnership working. Branch and Joy provide strong examples of effective digital navigation, trusted collaboration and youth-friendly support. The opportunity now is to build on these successes and ensure that the approaches and principles that make them effective are embedded consistently across the wider emotional wellbeing system. Joy demonstrates what is possible when services work together around the needs of children and young people, and provides a valuable model for future system development.



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
Welcoming, youth-friendly spaces to go when struggling	Wirral has a strong network of non-stigmatising, youth-friendly spaces, including The Hive, Open Door/Joy and neighbourhood youth provision. These environments align closely with what young people say they want from emotional wellbeing support, offering creative, relational and community-based alternatives to clinical settings. Whilst awareness and understanding of these spaces as routes into emotional wellbeing support could be strengthened, provision in this area represents a significant system strength.	Green	Continue to raise awareness of youth wellbeing spaces as places for emotional wellbeing support, not just activities. • Further strengthen links between Joy, The Hive, neighbourhood youth provision, Branch, schools and Family Hubs.
A single, simple way to find the right support	Branch provides a sophisticated digital triage and matching system and is the single route into CAMHS. This is a genuine strength compared to many areas. Awareness and confidence in using it varies.	Green	• Strengthen promotion of Branch with CYP, schools and families. • Use Branch data to identify unmet need and inform commissioning and place planning.



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CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Key Gaps / System Actions
Support that doesn't feel clinical or judgemental	Creative, VCSFE-led provision (Joy, Open Door, The Hive and youth work) strongly aligns with CYP preferences for non-clinical environments. My Mind presence within Joy demonstrates a willingness to deliver support differently.	Green	• Protect and expand hybrid clinical-community models such as Joy. • Capture learning to shape a Wirral standard for youth-friendly emotional wellbeing environments.
Flexible access (after school, evenings and weekends)	Youth provision and some VCSFE support operate during evenings and weekends, but emotional wellbeing support outside traditional hours remains variable across providers.	Amber	• Increase opportunities for out-of-hours emotional wellbeing support, including shared and rotating models. • Utilise existing community venues and youth spaces already operating during evenings and weekends.
Someone to talk to quickly, not long waits	Many early help, youth and VCSFE services provide timely access and interim support. However, awareness of these offers varies and some young people continue to report difficulties accessing help before reaching crisis point.	Amber	• Strengthen messaging that support is available before crisis through Branch, schools, Family Hubs and youth provision. • Ensure clear communication about what happens next following first contact. • Support the emerging Cheshire & Merseyside ambition that "No Child Waits Without Support".



CYP Priority	Current Position	Match	Key Gaps / System Actions
Support that understands neurodiversity and difference	Wirral has strong neurodiversity-aware provision (e.g. ADDvanced, Koala and SEND-inclusive youth spaces). Good practice exists, but it is not yet universal across all settings.	Amber	• Embed neurodiversity-affirming practice as a minimum expectation across emotional wellbeing services. • Increase workforce confidence and awareness of autism, ADHD and sensory needs. • Share learning from specialist providers across the wider workforce.
Help linked to real life, not just talking	Wirral excels in this area. Joy, Future Yard and youth provision connect wellbeing to creativity, belonging, skills development and employment opportunities. CYP value purpose, connection and identity.	Green	• Continue to describe these offers as emotional wellbeing interventions, not simply enrichment activities. • Strengthen links between youth, culture, employment and emotional wellbeing strategies.
Consistency and relationships over time	CYP consistently described the importance of longer-term relationships and reported frustration when support ended shortly after trust had been established. Whilst many services provide strong relational support, continuity is often influenced by funding arrangements, intervention lengths and transition points.	Amber	• Strengthen expectations around relational continuity across services. • Improve continuity during transitions, particularly between ages 16–18 and into adulthood. • Commission for stability and outcomes, not solely throughput.
Services that join up and don't repeat stories	Collaboration is a significant strength within the Wirral system, particularly through Branch, Future in Mind and partnership working. However, some CYP still report challenges navigating services and repeating their stories.	Amber	• Build on Branch and existing partnership arrangements to reduce duplication. • Develop shared outcomes and information-sharing approaches across the emotional wellbeing system. • Continue strengthening the "no wrong door" approach.



Conclusion

Wirral shows what is possible when we listen, collaborate and are prepared to do things differently. Taken together, the analysis in this report shows that Wirral is not starting from a position of deficit. In many respects, it is already demonstrating the characteristics of a mature, innovative and forward-thinking emotional wellbeing system. Young people consistently tell us they want welcoming spaces, trusted relationships, support that fits around their lives, and simple ways to find help without judgement or stigma. Much of Wirral's current offer reflects those priorities.

Through Branch, Wirral has developed a sophisticated approach to digital navigation and triage that many areas aspire to achieve. Through Joy, The Hive, Open Door, neighbourhood youth provision and the wider VCSFE offer, Wirral has shown how strong partnerships, innovative commissioning and a willingness to work differently can create youth-friendly, non-stigmatising support that young people genuinely want to access. These are not isolated initiatives, but examples of a system that values collaboration, trusts its partners and seeks to meet children and young people where they are.

The review also highlights an important opportunity. Whilst Wirral has many examples of outstanding practice, young people's experiences can still vary depending on where they live, what they know about available support, and how they enter the system. The next stage of development is therefore not to create a new system, but to ensure that the strengths already present are experienced consistently by every child and young person.

This means continuing to build on successful approaches by strengthening visibility, improving equity of access, supporting smooth transitions, embedding neurodiversity-informed practice, and ensuring that community-based, youth-friendly support is connected through a coherent and understandable pathway. It also means sustaining the collaborative culture, shared ambition and innovative thinking that have become defining features of the Wirral approach. Joy offers a powerful example of what is possible when clinical and non-clinical support work side by side, culture and creativity are recognised as protective factors, and young people experience a sense of belonging rather than assessment. The opportunity now is to ensure that these principles are not confined to individual services or places, but become a consistent experience across the wider system.

Wirral is already emerging as an exemplar across Cheshire and Merseyside in emotional wellbeing and early mental health support. By continuing to build on its strong foundations of partnership, co-production and courageous commissioning, it is well placed to demonstrate how a connected, preventative and youth-centred system can help children and young people thrive. The foundations are firmly in place; the next step is to ensure their benefits are visible, sustainable and equitable for every child and young person who needs support.



Recommendations - Wirral

1. Strengthen Visibility of Emotional Wellbeing Pathway

Ensure children, young people, families and professionals can easily identify, navigate and access emotional wellbeing support across Wirral.

- Position youth spaces as recognised emotional wellbeing support settings, not solely activity-based provision.
- Increase awareness and use of Branch amongst CYP, families and professionals.
- Deliver consistent promotion of emotional wellbeing support through schools, Family Hubs, community venues and digital platforms.
- Use youth-friendly approaches, including social media, QR codes, animations and co-produced materials.
- Maintain multiple access routes into support, including digital, outreach, community and face-to-face options.

2. Expand Early Help and Prevention

Increase opportunities for children and families to access support before needs escalate.

- Develop additional emotional wellbeing support for children aged 5-10 and their families.
- Strengthen referral and support pathways between schools, Family Hubs and emotional wellbeing services.
- Increase access to community-based wellbeing support linked to youth work, creativity, culture, sport and physical activity.
- Embed whole-school approaches that promote resilience, emotional literacy and wellbeing.
- Deliver targeted prevention activity focused on anxiety, social media, sleep, healthy lifestyles and other emerging priorities identified locally.
- Develop outreach and community-based approaches that proactively engage children and young people who are less likely to access existing provision, including those who are not in education, socially isolated, or experiencing barriers to attending community venues.
- Explore opportunities for mobile, outreach or pop-up models of support that bring emotional wellbeing provision closer to communities and locations that young people already use.



3. **Continuity, Access and Transitions**

Ensure support remains available, connected and responsive throughout key life stages.

- Implement consistent transition arrangements across services supporting 16-25 year olds.
- Embed transition planning and onward support into routine discharge processes, implementing the soon to be launched Transitio policy.
- Expand opportunities for peer mentoring, volunteering, training and employment pathways.
- Increase access to emotional wellbeing support during evenings, weekends and school holidays.
- Support the Cheshire & Merseyside ambition that "No Child Waits Without Support" by providing interim support while young people await specialist intervention.
- Strengthen support during transitions into adulthood, further education, employment and periods of disengagement from education.
- Review transport and accessibility barriers affecting access to emotional wellbeing support, particularly for children and young people living further from provision or travelling independently.
- Explore options to improve accessibility through further use of local community venues, outreach delivery and, where appropriate, subsidised or supported transport arrangements for children and young people accessing emotional wellbeing support.

4. **Strengthen Neurodiversity-Affirming and Inclusive Practice**

Ensure all emotional wellbeing support is accessible, inclusive and responsive to diverse needs.

- Implement neurodiversity-affirming practice across the emotional wellbeing system. This could include CYP being involved in an audit of existing services.
- Support the development and implementation of the Neurodiversity Hub.
- Increase workforce understanding of autism, ADHD, sensory needs and wider neurodivergent experiences.
- Expand access to sensory-aware, flexible and adapted support offers.
- Increase use of inclusive tools and approaches, including Knowing Me profiling.
- Develop targeted approaches to better engage boys and young men.



5. Sustain, Scale and Evaluate What Works

Use Wirral's strong culture of partnership and innovation to secure long-term impact.

- Develop a shared outcomes framework across emotional wellbeing partners.
- Use Branch and wider service data to inform commissioning, planning and service development.
- Evaluate and evidence the impact of community-based and preventative approaches.
- Reduce reliance on short-term funding arrangements where possible.
- Commission for continuity, relationships and long-term outcomes alongside activity and throughput, moving away from fixed six-session intervention models
- Capture and spread learning from successful models such as Branch, Joy, Open Door, The Hive and neighbourhood youth provision.
- Develop a shared vision for the future emotional wellbeing system that reflects the strengths of current practice.



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List of Services reviewed

Wirral

A&K Community Hub
Andys Man club
Bazaar (Open Door/Bloom Building)
Billy Found Mates (salvation army)
Branch website and referral/matching service
Break the Mould Wirral
BU Wirral
Carrbridge Centre Youth Club
Charlotte's Brightside
Chat Health
Comics Youth
Companeros crisis cafe (spider project)
Creative Youth Development (Pilgrim street)
Detached Youth Team
Directions for Men
Diversity Hub 67
Dove
Eastham Youth Space
Energise Cycles
Equilibrium North West CIC
Family Hubs
Future Yard
Grow Wellbeing
Harmony Hub (WEB)
Hatch (delivered by Utopia)
Health Services in Schools Youth Workers
Hectic Happiness
Heygarth Primary School
Hype (Central Park Hub)
I am PHAB Wirral (St Anne's Parish Centre)
Kooth
Let's Talk
Liscard Youth Space (in fire station)
MHST's
Moreton Youth Space (in library)
MYA
New ferry Youth Space
New Horizons LGBTQ+
Next Chapter
Open Door Charity
Pilgrim Centre Drama sessions
Positivity Club CIC
Quirky Community Hub

QWell (18+)
Resilient North West
Response Counselling (Pilgrim Street)
Shaftesbury Youth Club
Shine Together Community Hub
Spider Project (recovery through arts)
Taking Strides
The Drop In (Pilgrim Street Arts Centre)
The Hive Youth Zone
Tiny Tools for big Feelings (based from hired venues across Wirral)
Tomorrows Women
Trauma recovery community hub (through WEB)
Weapons Down Wirral
West Kirby Youth Space
Wirral Change
Wirral Forest Wellbeing walks
Wirral Health Project CIC
Wirral Mind
Wirral Youth Voice
Youth at Beechwood (The little centre)
Youth Fed Wirral
Zillo
Zillo Young Reporters
Career connect (also in LCR)
Daisy Inclusive
Collective Encounters
Belvedere Centre (for disabled children, yp and their friends)
Wirral Chinese Cultural Association

