



Meet Me Where I Am

Why under-served children and young people
in England can't access the mental health
and wellbeing support they need

space to grow

Support that helps children flourish

**The
Children's
Society**

Why under-served children and young people in England can't access the mental health and wellbeing support they need

Awareness of children and young people's mental health needs has never been higher. Yet for many, support remains out of reach. This is especially the case for those who are already facing disadvantage and are under-served by the current mental health system.

The Children's Society's new report demonstrates that barriers to access are not due to a lack of need or willingness to seek help – they are the result of a system that too often fails to recognise and respond to the children and young people who need support most.

Drawing on evidence from literature, practitioner insight, and consultations with children, this report highlights the barriers to accessing support that disproportionately affect under-served groups, and sets out clear implications for policy change.

The landscape in England

Mental health policy in England is increasingly focused on prevention and early support, with the 10 Year Health Plan recognising the role of community-based provision. However, delivery still lags behind ambition. The system remains heavily driven by crisis intervention and strict clinical thresholds, while rising demand continues to outpace recent service expansion. As a result, access is uneven and too often depends on where a child or young person lives.

What the reports shows

- **Trust and relationships matter:** many children and young people reported not feeling listened to or lacking a consistent adult they can rely on.
- **The system is not fit for under-served children and young people:** rigid processes force children to adapt, rather than the other way around.
- **The 'missing middle' gap most impacts under-served groups:** the system is not equipped to respond to complexity, particularly for those whose needs are less visible or do not meet standard thresholds.
- **Access is fragmented:** complex referrals and reliance on schools lead to inconsistency, especially for families less able to navigate support.
- **Short-term funding undermines access:** limiting services' abilities to build trust, sustain relationships, and deliver consistent support.

What works for under-served children and young people

The evidence is clear: under-served children and young people engage when support is built around relationships, delivered in places they trust, designed with flexibility to reflect their lives, and in the form of early, sustained support.

The Children Society's Space to Grow programme shows what this looks like in practice, delivering improved wellbeing outcomes for **82%** of participants who completed support, while successfully reaching diverse and under-served communities. Its success is not incidental – it reflects a model built on trust, accessibility, and long-term engagement.



Recommendations for England

If government is serious about improving children's mental health, it must move beyond incremental change and address structural barriers holding the system back.

Ensure every child and young person can identify and access at least one trusted adult of their choosing.

Building on the commitment in the National Youth Strategy, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport should ensure that trusted adults across key settings (including schools, community organisations, and health services) are trained to recognise and respond to mental health needs, with strong safeguarding in place.

Introduce longer-term funding cycles for children and young people's wellbeing and mental health services to enable sustained impact.

The government should commit to commissioning services for children and young people on a minimum five-year funding cycle. This will enable providers to build trust, embed effective and locally responsive support, plan strategically, retain skilled staff, and deliver more consistent and impactful mental health support.

Ensure all children and young people have open-access, community-based wellbeing and mental health support available locally.

The government should ensure that all children and young people can turn to an open-access, community-based drop-in hub that provides support for their wellbeing and mental health. These services should offer multiple routes for access, including self-referral, and should be locally embedded, youth-friendly, and designed to provide early support before needs escalate.

Increase investment in support for children and young people with moderate to high mental health needs.

The Treasury and the Department for Health and Social Care should significantly increase investment in services that support children and young people with moderate to high mental health and wellbeing needs, including expanding access to timely and appropriate support.



Strengthen support for parents and carers through navigation and advocacy support in services.

The government should ensure that all services supporting children and young people are equipped to help parents and carers understand and navigate the mental health system. This should include the provision of clear information, guidance, and dedicated advocacy support where needed.

Introduce a national wellbeing measurement for children and young people.

The Department for Education should introduce a national, annual measure of children and young people's wellbeing. This should be supported by a funded programme that enables consistent data collection, analysis, and dissemination at both local and national levels to inform decision making.

A call for system change

Under-served children and young people are not failing to access support – systems are failing to reach them. Barriers are structural and rooted in how the system was designed.

Addressing these inequalities requires a fundamental shift towards relational and community-based approaches that meet children and young people 'where they are'.

Without this transformation, under-served children and young people will continue to face unequal access to support and poorer outcomes.

Too many teenagers are struggling with challenges that affect their wellbeing, yet support often comes too late — only when problems have reached crisis point.

Every young person deserves the chance to feel safe, supported and hopeful about their future. That's why we meet teenagers where they are, providing the tailored support they need to navigate the pressures they face today and helping them build resilience, confidence and positive wellbeing. We also work to influence the policies and services that shape their lives, so that every teenager can access the right support at the right time. Because hope, happiness and a good childhood should belong to every young person.

Together, we can create the conditions for teenagers to thrive.



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