



Meet Me Where I Am

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

space to grow

Support that helps children flourish

MACS

SUPPORTING CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Why under-served children and young people in Northern Ireland 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, across Northern Ireland, support remains out of reach for many. 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 Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of mental ill-health in the UK.¹ Despite increasing awareness of children's mental health, many children and young people – particularly those already facing disadvantage – continue to experience significant barriers to accessing timely support.

1 in 8 young people in Northern Ireland meet the criteria for anxiety or depression.² Long waiting lists for statutory Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), increasing levels of anxiety, depression and emotional distress, and pressures arising from poverty, educational challenges, family stress and the legacy of conflict have contributed to unmet need across the region. Early intervention and community-based support services remain under-resourced, resulting in many children and young people not receiving help until their difficulties reach crisis point.

This gap between need and provision has implications not only for health outcomes but also for educational attainment, overall family wellbeing, and long-term social and economic outcomes in Northern Ireland.

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.
- **Schools are the gateway to support:** but reliance on schools creates bottlenecks and unequal access, especially if needs go unrecognised and capacity is limited.

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 Space to Grow programme (delivered by MACS in partnership with The Children's Society) 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.

^{1,2} Northern Ireland Audit Office (2023) Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Northern Ireland Audit Office. Available at: <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/html-document/mental-health-services-northern-ireland> (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

Recommendations for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly

If the Executive 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.

The Department for Communities, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health 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 Executive 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 Executive 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 and review statutory eligibility thresholds to enable earlier access to mental health support before children and young people reach crisis.

The Department of Finance and the Department of Health 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 Executive 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 of 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. And yet, investing in early support has both a moral and economic case, with £14 in benefits generated for every £1 spent.³

Addressing the 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 in Northern Ireland will continue to face unequal access to support and poorer outcomes.

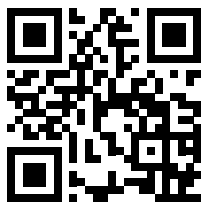
³ Rodriguez Cabrera, K. and Franklin, J. (2026) Prevention that pays: The economic case for early support for young people's mental health and wellbeing. London: Pro Bono Economics (PBE). Available at: <https://pbe.co.uk/publications/prevention-that-pays-the-economic-case-for-early-support-for-childrens-mental-health-and-wellbeing/> (Accessed: 10 July 2026).

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

The Children's Society works across the UK to improve the lives of children and young people through direct support, research and influencing policy.

In Northern Ireland, Space to Grow is delivered in partnership with MACS Supporting Children and Young People, providing relationship-based wellbeing support for under-served children and young people while demonstrating approaches that can inform wider system change.

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



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find out more.**

Find out more

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