



Meet Me Where I Am

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

Awareness of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing needs has never been higher. Yet for many in Wales, support remains out of reach. This is especially the case for those who are already facing disadvantage and are under-served by the current 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 systems that too often fail 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 and young people, the report highlights barriers to accessing support that disproportionately affect under-served groups. It also sets out clear implications for policy change in Wales, including action needed from both Welsh and UK government, where responsibility sits outside devolved competence.

The landscape in Wales

Wales has a strong devolved policy and legislative framework for children and young people's wellbeing, including duties to: consider children's rights; promote wellbeing, early intervention and partnership working; and take long-term, preventative action. Welsh policy increasingly recognises the need for a whole-system approach to children's mental health through the NYTH/ NEST framework and the All-Age Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

But implementation must now turn these ambitions into consistent, accessible, community-based support for under-served children and young people. For the UK government, action must also address reserved policy decisions – including welfare and social security, immigration and asylum, employment, and online safety – which shape poverty, insecurity, discrimination, digital harms, and family stress.

What the report 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 can 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 provided early enough to prevent needs escalating.

The Children's 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 reflects a model built on trust, accessibility, and long-term engagement.

Recommendations for Wales

If government is serious about improving children's mental health, it must move beyond incremental change and address structural barriers holding the system back. In Wales, this means using devolved levers across health, education, social care, youth work and community services.

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

Building on the NYTH/NEST framework, the Whole-School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being, and Wales's commitment to children's rights, Welsh government should ensure that children and young people can access trusted adults across key settings, including schools, youth work, community organisations, health services, social care and family support. Trusted adults should be equipped to recognise and respond to mental health and wellbeing needs, with strong safeguarding and clear confidentiality practices in place.

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

Welsh government should commit to commissioning services for children and young people on a minimum five-year funding cycle. This would 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. It would also align with the preventative and long-term duties within the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

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

Welsh government should ensure that all children and young people can turn to open-access, community-based wellbeing and mental health support through multiple routes, including self-referral. This should build on the direction of the NYTH/NEST framework, the Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being, and the All-Age Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, ensuring support is 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.

Welsh government should 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.

Welsh 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, advice and assistance, guidance, and dedicated advocacy support where needed, in line with the Social Services and Well-being Act's emphasis on voice, control, information and advocacy.

Enhance the national wellbeing measurement for children and young people.

Welsh government should strengthen the national wellbeing measurement framework so that all children under 18, including 16- and 17-year-olds, are consistently visible in children and young people's wellbeing data. This should build on the Well-being of Future Generations Act while ensuring that data is age-sensitive, regular, and locally useful. It should also be used alongside children and young people's lived experience to inform policy and commissioning and service improvement, and to identify inequalities in access and outcomes.

A call for system change

Under-served children and young people are not failing to access support – systems are failing to reach them. In Wales, the devolved policy framework already points towards the right direction – rights-based, preventative, relational and community-based support. But delivery will only be effective if UK government also uses its reserved powers to reduce the poverty, insecurity and exclusion that undermine children's mental health and wellbeing.

Addressing inequalities requires a fundamental shift towards services that meet children and young people where they are, are easy to access, and are trusted by families and communities. It also requires stronger joint working between UK and Welsh government so that reserved and devolved systems do not pull in different directions.

Without this transformation, under-served children and young people in Wales 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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