

Children and Young People's Mental Health Transformation Plan

2026 - 2027



Foreword

We are proud to introduce this one-year **Children and Young People's Mental Health Plan for NHS Cheshire and Merseyside**. It builds on the foundations of our 2024-26 transformation plan and reflects the shared commitment of our system; NHS, Local Authorities, education, Voluntary, Community, Faith, Social Enterprise Sector (VCFSE) partners, families and carers - working together to improve the lives of children and young people.

Children and young people have been clear about what matters most:

"When people across services work together, it feels different. You don't have to keep repeating your story. What matters to us is feeling listened to, supported early, and not having to wait until things get worse."

We know that mental health is shaped by more than services alone. Family, education, community connection and the wider pressures young people face all play a role. This plan strengthens how we work together across health, social care, education and communities to provide earlier support and more joined-up care. For young people, support is not just specialist services, it is the trusted adult who notices, the safe space to talk and the ability to access the right help at the right time.

This plan comes at a time of national change and financial challenge. We are being asked to improve early intervention, reduce unwarranted variation and strengthen alternatives to hospital care, while responding to increasing demand. Our ambition remains clear and focused. As young people told us: *"We know the system is under pressure. What we ask is simple: keep us involved, be honest, and make changes that make life easier, not harder."*

Children and Young People Representative

Over the last two years, we have made significant progress together. We have expanded Mental Health Support Teams to 60% of schools/colleges, supported over 37,000 children and young people each year, delivered 24/7 crisis support in every area, and introduced NHS 111 Option mental health. We have also launched all age Mental Health Response Vehicles, strengthened mental health support in paediatric acute settings and redesigned care pathways including community eating disorders, young adults and inpatient care. These achievements reflect the dedication of our workforce and partners across the system.

This one-year plan focuses on what will make the biggest difference now: stabilising services, reducing waits, improving equity and ensuring children, young people and families can see and feel improvements where they live. It is grounded in partnership, evidence and a shared commitment to continuous improvement.

"What we hope for is simple: a system that understands us, supports us earlier, and stays with us through the tough moments."

This plan reflects what children and young people have told us matters most and is our collective responsibility to turn that into meaningful change. Thank you to everyone who continues to contribute to this work and to those who support children and young people every day across Cheshire and Merseyside. Your leadership, compassion and collaboration continue to drive meaningful change.

NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB

Contents

	Page
1) Foreword	2
2) Our Plan	4
a.The purpose of the plan	
b.Our ambition	
c.Our principles underpinning the plan	
3) Achievements from our 2024-26 plan	5
4) System Wide Priorities	6
• Prevention and Earlier Help	7
• Smooth Transitions & Support for Young Adults (16-25yrs)	8
• Crisis and Urgent Support	9
• Appropriate Care Pathways for Complex and Specialist Needs	10
5) System Enablers	11
7) How we will review and monitor our progress	12
8) Glossary of terms	13

Looking for a shorter version?

This is the full plan. We've also created a short animation explaining the plan

[You can view it here.](#)

Glossary of terms – You may find you are not familiar with some of the language in this document, so we have created a glossary for you, to help you understand better. You can find this at the back of the document.



The Purpose of Our 2026 - 2027 Plan

This one-year Children and Young People's Mental Health Plan builds on the strong foundations created through our 2024-26 transformation plan. It brings a clear focus on what we can realistically improve over the next 12 months, during a period of significant system change, increasing demand and financial pressure. This plan supports the national direction set out in the NHS 10 Year Health Plan by shifting care from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. It also supports NHS Cheshire and Merseyside's strategic commissioning priorities by focusing on prevention, neighbourhood-based support, reducing unwarranted variation, improving outcomes and making best use of collective resources.

This plan has been shaped through engagement with children, young people, families and partners across Cheshire and Merseyside. What we have heard clearly is that while progress is being made, there is more to do to ensure that improvements are consistently felt in the day-to-day experiences of children and young people.

This plan therefore focuses not only on what we will deliver, but on how this will improve experience, ensuring that children and young people are supported earlier, understand what is happening and receive the right help at the right time.

Our Ambition

Together, we're working towards an ambition we all share: to enable every child and young person in Cheshire and Merseyside to achieve their goals, thrive and reach their full potential, whatever their mental health needs or circumstances.

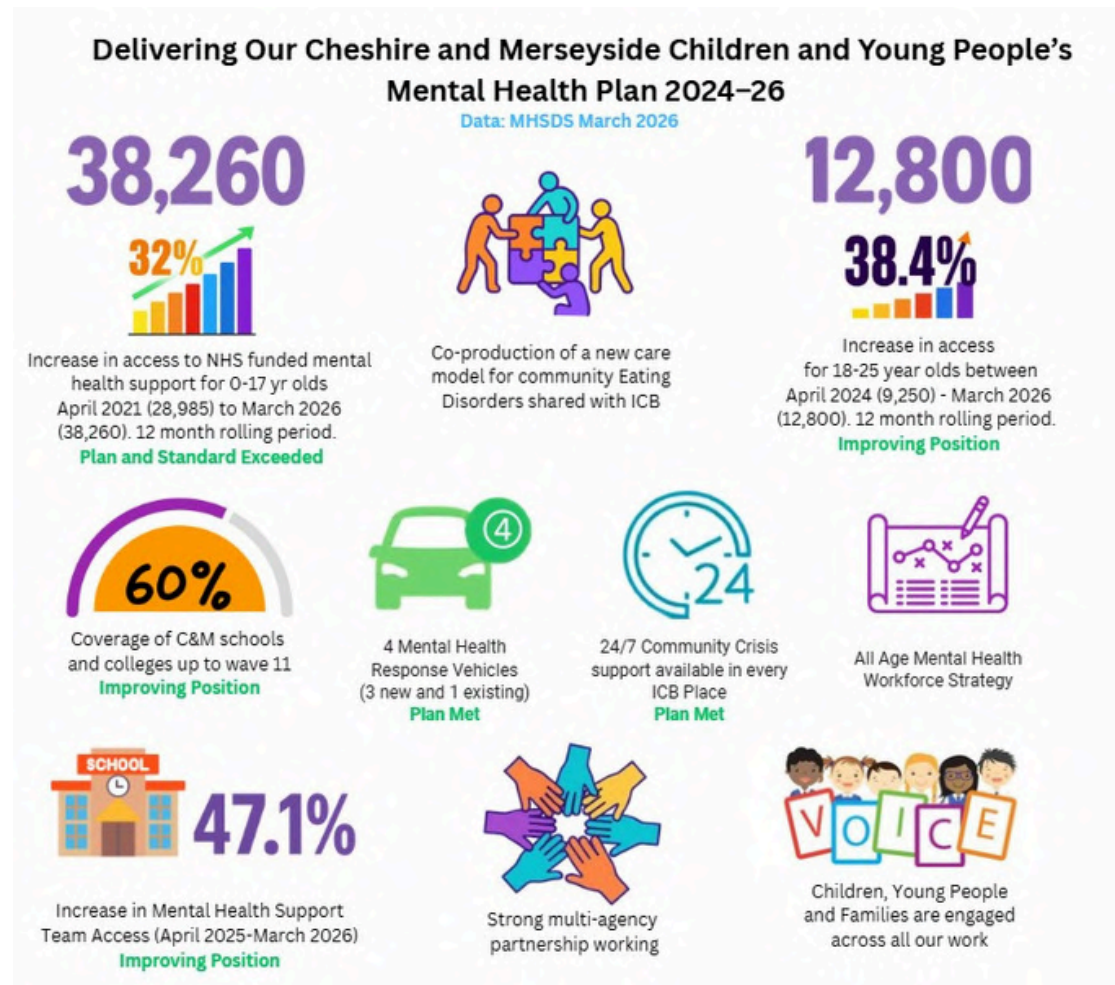
Our Principles

- Children, young people and families are at the heart of everything we do, with meaningful engagement and co-production shaping every stage of transformation
- Inclusive opportunities and support, recognising diverse needs across communities
- Person-centred and trauma-informed care, tailored to the needs of each child and family
- Equity at the heart, reducing inequalities in access, experience and outcomes.
- A 'think family' approach, valuing the role of parents, carers and wider networks
- Integrated, collaborative and cross-agency working
- A commitment to learning, improvement and innovation as needs evolve
- Sustainable and effective use of resources

Achievements from Our 2024-26 CYP Mental Health Transformation Plan

Over the last two years, our 2024-26 Children and Young People's Mental Health Transformation Plan has brought partners across Cheshire and Merseyside together around a shared vision for improving the lives of infants, children, young people and young adults. Working across the ICB and in close partnership with local authorities, education, the voluntary, community, faith, social enterprise (VCFSE) sector, families, carers and young people themselves we have made real, measurable progress towards building a more joined-up, responsive and inclusive system of support.

This infographic celebrates some of the key achievements we've delivered together, from expanding early help in schools, to improving crisis provision, redesigning specialist pathways and strengthening our workforce for the future. These milestones reflect the dedication and hard work of everyone involved across our system. They also show what is possible when we collaborate, listen to the voices of children, young people and families and stay focused on what matters most: improving experiences and outcomes.



Progress of the plan would not have been possible without the commitment of our NHS providers, VCSE partners, commissioners, clinicians, lived experience representatives, educators and community leaders. Your partnership continues to drive meaningful change for children, young people and families across Cheshire and Merseyside.

Thank you.

System Wide Priorities for 2026/27

2026/27 is a year of consolidation and focused delivery, building on the foundations laid in our last plan. We recognise the significant system change, workforce pressures and financial challenge facing all partners across Cheshire and Merseyside. Because of this, our priorities for the coming year focus on doing the fundamentals well, reducing unwarranted clinical variation and strengthening the conditions for sustainable improvement. Progress this year will rely on collaboration across NHS, local authority, education and VCFSE partners.

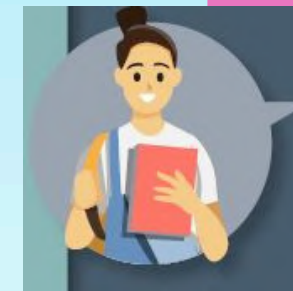
Our system-wide priorities for 2026–27 reflect what children, young people, families and partners have told us matters most and what our system needs now to stabilise, improve and build strong foundations for the future.

- **Prevention and Earlier Help** – Continue improving access and reducing waiting times, while strengthening early intervention, prevention and support available while children and young people are waiting for help.
- **Young Adults and Transitions (16–25yrs)** – Continue improving support for 16–25 year olds, ensuring smoother, more consistent transitions and better continuity of care between services.
- **Mental Health Crisis and Urgent Support** – Provide proactive, compassionate and timely support that reduces harm and ensures children and young people can access urgent help in the most appropriate setting.
- **Appropriate Places of Care and Inpatient Services** – Continue improving care for children and young people with the most complex needs, ensuring they receive high-quality, therapeutic support in the right setting.

What this means for children and young people?

Over the next year, children and young people should:

- Be able to access help earlier
- Have clearer information about what happens next
- Feel supported while waiting for services
- Experience more joined-up care and not have to repeat their story
- Receive support that feels relevant, compassionate and timely



Prevention and Earlier Help

Continue improving access and reducing waiting times, while strengthening early intervention, prevention and support available while children and young people are waiting for help.

What this means for children and young people:

- Children and young people should be able to access help earlier, before things reach crisis point.
- Support should be available in schools, communities and neighbourhoods, not just specialist services.

Deliverable	Key Actions	Measure
Increase visibility of local services	• Rapid review and update of public and professional service directories by local authority footprint to ensure all information is accurate and up to date	CYP and families reported improvements on where to look for help and support
Improve accessibility and inclusivity of mental health support for CYP with diverse needs, including neurodivergent young people and those from underserved or protected groups	• Enact engagement strategies and targeted interventions to improve access for harder to reach groups • To co-produce reasonable adjustments to improve accessibility for neurodivergent CYP (e.g. sensory-informed environments, flexible engagement approaches, preferences)	To evidence access reflective of population demographics, health inequalities and population need
To achieve the NHS England access target for C&M of 37,560 CYP accessing MH support over a 12-month rolling period	• To mobilise improvement plans to enable more equitable access to support based on population need (0-25 years) • VCSE sector data capture and reporting to accurately evidence activity	NHS England CYP MH Access metric
Reduce waiting times to access CYP mental health support	• To improve data quality and capture to enable more accurate reporting of waiting times • Expand digital early help offer to enable equity of access across C&M • Strengthen front-door / triage approaches to ensure CYP are directed to the right support first time via the development of NHS and VCSE collaboration	• National Metric: Reduction in 104 week waiting times • CYP/Family feedback
Develop a consistent, proactive support offer for children, young people and families before treatment begins, incorporating whole-family and Think Family approaches	• To Improve waiting experiences through clear communication about waiting times and available support, alongside co-produced and accessible resources for children, young people and families. • Strengthen family-focused and preventative support through closer alignment between CYP mental health, adult mental health, safeguarding and wider family services, including guidance on safe screen time and sleep.	Consistent pro-active support offer in place across C&M
Expand and optimise Mental Health Support Teams focusing on prevention and earlier help	• Mobilise Wave 15 and 16 MHSTs in line with 100% coverage plan and national benchmarks	National metric: MHST coverage % (trajectory toward 100%)
Improve the capture and reporting of outcome measures	• To improve data quality to enable more accurate reporting of clinical and patient reported outcome measures	Increased paired outcome scores that evidence service effectiveness
Develop strategic commissioning and implementation plan for Community Eating Disorder Service, including ARFID pathway	• Gap analysis of current verses new best practice service model/national guidance • Business case for change • Phased strategic implementation plan in place	Phased strategic implementation plan in place
Contribute to neighbourhood-based MDT pilots supporting CYP mental health to inform service transformation	• To contribute to the development of neighbourhood models of care in line with national and ICB neighbourhood care principles	Pilot evaluation complete and recommendations for future commissioning intentions

Smooth Transitions & Support for Young Adults (16–25yrs)

Continue improving support for 16–25 year olds, ensuring smoother, more consistent transitions and better continuity of care between services.

What this means for children and young people:

- Young people should experience consistent, joined-up support as they move into adulthood.
- They should have a clear plan, feel supported by services that understand their needs, and not have to start again when they transition.

Deliverable	Key Actions	Measure
To gain approval for the C&M CYP Mental Health, Learning Disability/Autism Transition Policy and evaluate its use and effectiveness	• Approval of the Policy • Adopt and spread – use of the policy • Audit, evaluate, improve	• % of young people with a transition plan in place by age 17 • Evidenced improved experience for CYP, families and our workforce
Expand and strengthen C&M Transitions Community of Practice to drive consistency, shared learning and improvement across the system	• Improve joint working between CYP and adult services • Target support for high-risk young adults and those with protected characteristics (e.g. care-experienced, NEET, LGBTQ+)	• Active Community of Practice • Workforce reported improvements in confidence, knowledge and support
Finalise C&M 16–25 yrs young adults best practice recommendations that have been co-produced during 2025/26	Finalise the 16–25 best practice recommendations, ensuring they reflect: • Youth-friendly, inclusive approaches • Seamless transition between CYP and adult services Engage system partners (NHS, Local Authorities, VCSE) to review and refine the model	• Best practice model finalised and formally endorsed • Evidence of co-production embedded in the model
Establish a pilot to test best practice recommendations by exploring various funding opportunities and configuration options	• Identify priority Place(s) to act as pilot sites (based on need, readiness, inequalities) • Explore and secure funding routes (ICB, LA, transformation funds, VCSE partnerships) or other configuration options • Define the pilot model, which may include: youth hubs / community-based access points, integrated 16–25 pathways (bridging CYP and adult services) flexible, multidisciplinary support • Implement the pilot with clear access routes (“no wrong door”) youth-friendly environments and approaches • Develop and implement an evaluation framework from the outset	• Pilot successfully mobilised and operational • Increased access to mental health support for 16–25 year olds • Increased availability of youth-friendly, community-based support (e.g. youth hubs) • Positive young person experience and engagement • Evidence to support future scale-up across Cheshire & Merseyside

Crisis and Urgent Support

Provide proactive, compassionate and timely support that reduces harm and ensures children and young people can access urgent help in the most appropriate setting.

What this means for children and young people:

Children and young people should be able to access timely, compassionate and coordinated urgent mental health support in the most appropriate setting, reducing reliance on emergency departments and improving their experience of care and safety.

Deliverable	Key Actions	Measure
Strengthen multi-agency responses for children and young people with complex and escalating needs through a refreshed and strengthened Gateway model, improving oversight, escalation, learning, and coordinated safety planning across the system.	- Review and align Gateway delivery arrangements with the ICB operating model, including oversight of Gateway, CNEST, DSD themes, and multi-agency safety planning - Review and strengthen After Action Review and escalation protocols to ensure consistent system processes and learning - Develop and implement a digital CNEST model - Update the 2024 Gateway Evaluation Report to inform continuous improvement	- Gateway delivery arrangements are reviewed and aligned to the developing ICB operating model - A multi-agency forum for CYP with complex unmet need is established. - Clear and consistent system-wide escalation, After Action Review processes are agreed and implemented. - Intelligence and thematic learning from Gateway activity, CNEST reporting, escalations, and After Action Reviews inform continuous improvement and system transformation.
Expand and embed community-based crisis alternatives across C&M providing crisis response closer to home and in more therapeutic settings	- To develop a strategic business case based on population health need, system data and intelligence, co-produced C&M crisis alternatives model along with national best practice to expand crisis alternatives in the community across C&M - To develop phased mobilisation plan (including financial planning)	- Number of CYP accessing crisis alternatives (safe spaces, cafes, etc.) - Reduction in CYP A&E attendances with a primary reason of mental health
National deliverable: Implement an all-age Crisis Text Service with CYP access, ensuring timely and appropriate responses	- Procurement of Crisis Text Service across ICB footprint - Implementation of service in line with service specification and alignment with wider crisis provision	Number of CYP using Crisis Text Service; response times, identification of need, onward support and experience data to all inform future transformation
Align CYP crisis pathways across services and organisational boundaries to provide seamless and joined up care	- Develop and implement a single, joined-up crisis pathway - Establish and communicate a clear, system-wide pathway linking NHS 111, Mental Health Response Vehicles and Community Crisis Teams to ensure timely, seamless and easy-to-navigate support for children, young people and families - Strengthen multi-agency crisis response with blue light services - Work in partnership with Ambulance and Police services to agree shared protocols, improve coordination and ensure consistent responses to CYP mental health crises across the system	- CYP/family experience of joined-up crisis care - Crisis response times across the pathway - Reduction in A&E attendances and police/ambulance conveyances
Strengthen the interface between mental health and acute services, including continuation of Mental Health Champions in paediatric settings	- Continue the C&M network of MH champions across Cheshire & Merseyside with regular peer learning and sharing best practice - Deliver targeted training programme for paediatric and ED staff (e.g. risk assessment, de-escalation, Learning Disability and Neurodiversity awareness) - Develop consistent processes and pathways between acute and MH services e.g. parallel assessment and streaming, as part of the all-age crisis transformation	- MH Champions in all paediatric acute settings with protected time to support service and workforce development - Development of consistent protocols and tools e.g. parallel assessment

Appropriate Care Pathways for Complex and Specialist Needs

Continue improving care for children and young people with the most complex needs, ensuring they receive high-quality, therapeutic support in the right setting.

What this means for children and young people:

- Children and young people with the most complex mental health needs should receive care in the right place as close to home as possible.
- They should experience high-quality, therapeutic care and be supported to return home quickly with the right help in place.

Deliverable	Key Actions	Measure
Secure approval and begin mobilisation of Appropriate Places of Care prototypes.	• Secure approval of co-produced APoC model and business case across health and social care • Mobilisation plan developed including estate, workforce and service model/s • Agree decision-making framework for placements and funding responsibility • Define outcomes framework and reporting arrangements • Evaluate impact and develop a plan for scale and long-term sustainability	• APoC business case approved + prototype go-live milestone achieved • Reduction in inpatient LoS (where appropriate) in acute trusts • Reduction in delayed discharges in acute trusts • Reduce out of area social care placements
Deliver CYP Inpatient Quality Transformation	• Implement a consistent, trauma-informed inpatient care model and reduce restrictive practice • Strengthen admission gatekeeping and alternatives to inpatient care • Improve flow through active length of stay management and multi-agency discharge planning • Enhance CYP and family experience through co-production and involvement in care • Strengthen system oversight using shared data, governance and continuous learning	• Reduction in CYP out-of-area placements • Reduction in inpatient Length of Stay (where appropriate) • Reduction in delayed discharges • Reduce delayed discharges and out of area placements
Evaluate Eating Disorder Day Service and plan scale-up to increase access to Day Services across the C&M footprint – providing care closer to home	• Evaluate day service to assess impact on admissions, length of stay and experience • Define and standardise the role of day services within the end-to-end ED pathway to ensure seamless transitions between community, day and inpatient care • Develop and implement a phased scale-up plan to increase access and deliver care closer to home	• Evaluation outcomes from ED Day Service (reduction in admissions/LoS).

System Enablers

These are the foundations that make delivery possible

Maintain an integrated approach

across NHS, Local Authorities, education and VCFSE partners, with shared accountability for outcomes.

Embed co-production

through CYP voice, parents/carers, lived experience and our workforce.

Continue to develop integrated, neighbourhood and community-based approaches

targeting inequalities across all areas of delivery, with a clear focus on underserved and harder-to-reach groups

Progress delivery of the Cheshire & Merseyside Mental Health Workforce Strategy

including development of peer support roles and lived experience workforce.

Progress delivery of the Cheshire and Merseyside Digital Sub-Strategy For Mental Health

strengthening multi-agency data and intelligence, including the C&M CYP Dashboard (access, waits, inequalities, crisis and outcomes).

Strengthen the role of VCFSE partners

as key delivery partners, particularly in prevention, early help and community-based support

Improve digital maturity of Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise providers to support consistent and reliable data

Accelerate the use of digital innovation to improve access and experience, including tech-enabled support, digital platforms and emerging AI solutions to streamline pathways, reduce burden and better target support.



How We Will Deliver and Measure Progress

As the strategic commissioner for Cheshire and Merseyside, the ICB sets the shared direction for this plan but delivery can only succeed through strong collaboration with our NHS providers, Local Authorities, education partners, and our Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE) sector. Most importantly, we will continue to work alongside children, young people and families, whose insight and lived experience guide where improvement is most needed.

To show real progress, we must be clear about what we aim to achieve and how we will measure change. Each deliverable in this plan is supported by specific indicators that act as stepping stones helping us understand what is working, where variation remains and how outcomes are improving for children and families.

Implementation of the plan will be driven collectively. Providers, Programmes and Partners will lead delivery within their areas of responsibility, supported by the Cheshire and Merseyside CYP Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Programme Partnership bringing together the ICB, NHS providers, Local Authorities, Directors of Children's Services, VCFSE and Lived Experience partners. This partnership ensures strong oversight, shared accountability and a system-wide approach to improvement.

The supporting implementation plan will set out named leads, milestones, measures, risks and dependencies for each deliverable. This will enable the Programme Partnership to track progress quarterly and provide assurance on delivery, impact and areas requiring escalation.

This plan will be published on the ICB website so that children, young people, families and system partners can see our commitments and follow our progress.

We are committed to delivering this plan and our ambition to enable every child and young person with mental health needs to achieve their goals and life potential.



Our children and young people are at the heart of this plan.

Acronym	Meaning
APoC	Appropriate Places of Care
ARFID	Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CYP	Children and Young People
ED	Eating Disorder
ED	Emergency Department or Accident and Emergency
ICB	Integrated Care Board
ICS	Integrated Care System
LA	Local Authority
MH	Mental Health
MHST	Mental Health Support Team (schools and colleges)
MHSDS	Mental Health Services Data Set
MDT	Multi-Disciplinary Team
NHS 111	NHS urgent care telephone service
NHSE	NHS England
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
VCFSE	Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise
YP	Young Person

Glossary of Terms

You may find you are not familiar with some of the language in this document, so we have created a glossary for you, to help you understand better.

