

Setting a National Policy (Strategy?) for Youth Mental Health Early Intervention in Malta

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What Have We Heard Today?

Emergent themes

- Rising anxiety — concerns about the future
- Perceived lack of support systems in educational settings
- Growing digital pressures
- Academic and occupational stress — feeling unable to meet expectations
- Gender dimension
- Loneliness

Key signals

- Small numbers show increased risk
- Need for coordinated early support to prevent progression

Why This Matters NOW

Youth mental health concerns on the rise

Prevalence data shows increasing rates of anxiety, depression and distress among young people.

Early intervention works

Evidence clearly demonstrates that timely support improves long-term outcomes.

Malta has strong foundations

Existing policy frameworks provide a solid base to build upon.

Action now requires **system integration**

Coordinated, cross-sector responses are essential — not isolated initiatives.

 *Do we really need another framework? The answer is — yes, and here's why.*

Yes — Because the Evidence Demands It

- The 2024 National Report on the Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents in Malta (Malta Wellbeing INDEX Project) highlights growing concerns that require **coordinated policy action**.
- It notes that lower wellbeing in adolescence can increase later risk of mental health difficulties **if needs are not identified and addressed early**.
- A national youth mental health early intervention strategy would strengthen **joined-up responses** across education, health, youth and community services, reducing later demand on specialist care.

Complements/strengthens Malta's existing policy framework.

Policy or Strategy? Understanding the Difference

POLICY

What we commit to

A policy sets the principles, direction, priorities and rules for decision-making.

- What is our position?
- What outcomes matter?
- What standards will guide us?
- What commitments are we making?

STRATEGY

How we will achieve it

A strategy is the plan of action used to deliver policy goals.

- How will we get there?
- What actions come first?
- Who does what?
- What resources are needed?
- What timeline and milestones apply?

Building on Existing Frameworks

How the Youth Early Intervention Strategy adds to Malta's policy architecture

The Connective Tissue of Maltese Policy

Mental Health Strategy for Malta

2020-2030

- Community based
- Rights based
- No stigma

Children's Policy Framework

2024-2030

Rights based:

- Safety and Protection
- Participation
- Equity and Inclusion
- Holistic Wellbeing

National Youth Policy

2021-2030

- Active participation

National Suicide Prevention Strategy

A specialised extension of the broader Mental Health Strategy for Malta

Youth Mental Health Early Intervention

*Malta already has the policy foundations. What is missing is a dedicated strategy that **connects** them into **a practical early-intervention system** for young people.*

Building Upon Existing Frameworks: Youth MH early intervention strategy

National Mental Health Strategy

Existing: Provides the health-system direction

Adds: A specific youth pathway, low-threshold access, early detection, referral routes for YP.

Children's Policy Framework

Existing: Rights-based foundation for child wellbeing, protection and inclusion

Adds: Practical mechanisms to support vulnerability and ensure youth voices shape services.

National Youth Policy

Existing: Focuses on participation, empowerment and transitions

Adds: Mental-health-specific support across settings and transition points.

National Suicide Prevention Strategy

Existing: Focuses on prevention, crisis response and reducing risk

Adds: The earlier layer before crisis: spotting distress and creating rapid support routes.

Culminates in service development: Early Detection and Intervention Service (ED&IS)

So — Not Just Another Policy

A strategy that is:

Practical

Service-development oriented (ED&IS)— focused on real change on the ground.

Cross-Sectoral

Bridging health, education, youth, community and justice sectors.

Youth-Centred

Young people as active partners in design, delivery and evaluation.

Measurable

Clear outcomes, indicators and accountability mechanisms built in.

Not just another document. A delivery framework.

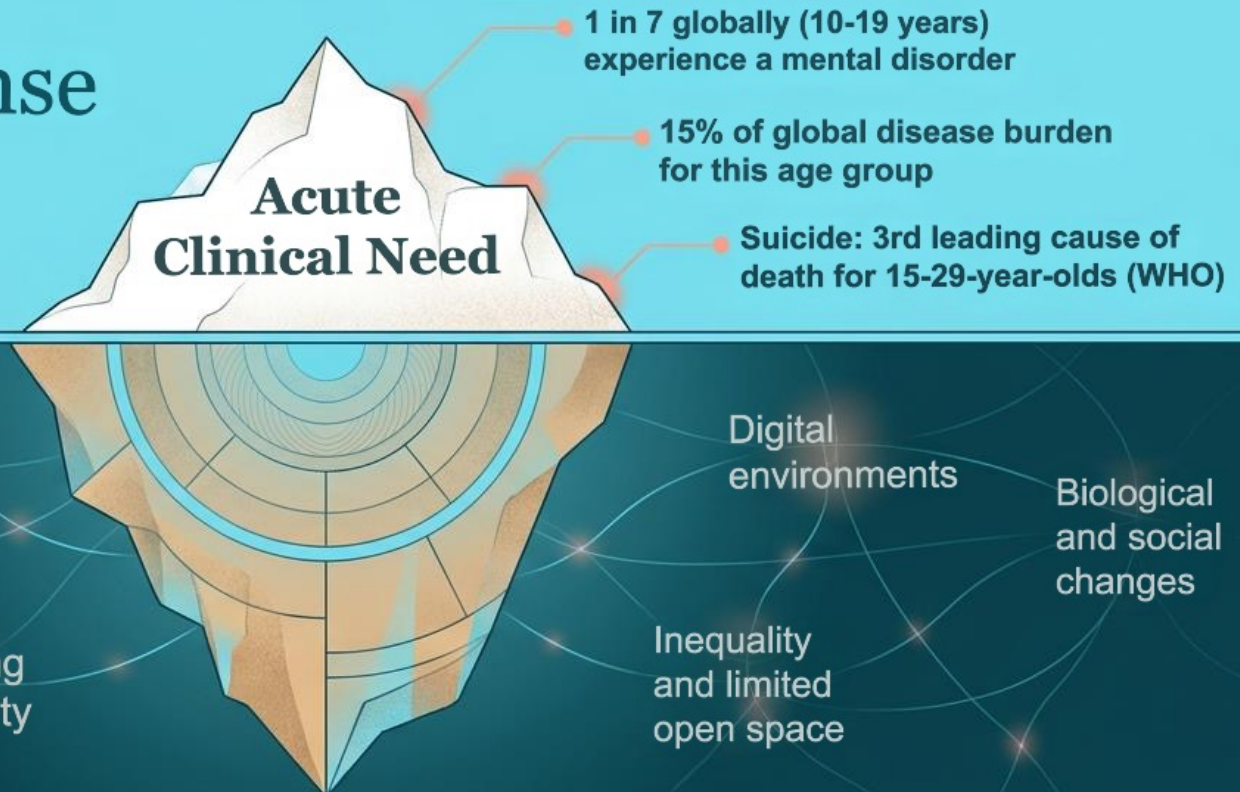
Do Not Pathologise Young People

Not every distress is disorder.

Sometimes distress reflects normal responses to difficult circumstances:

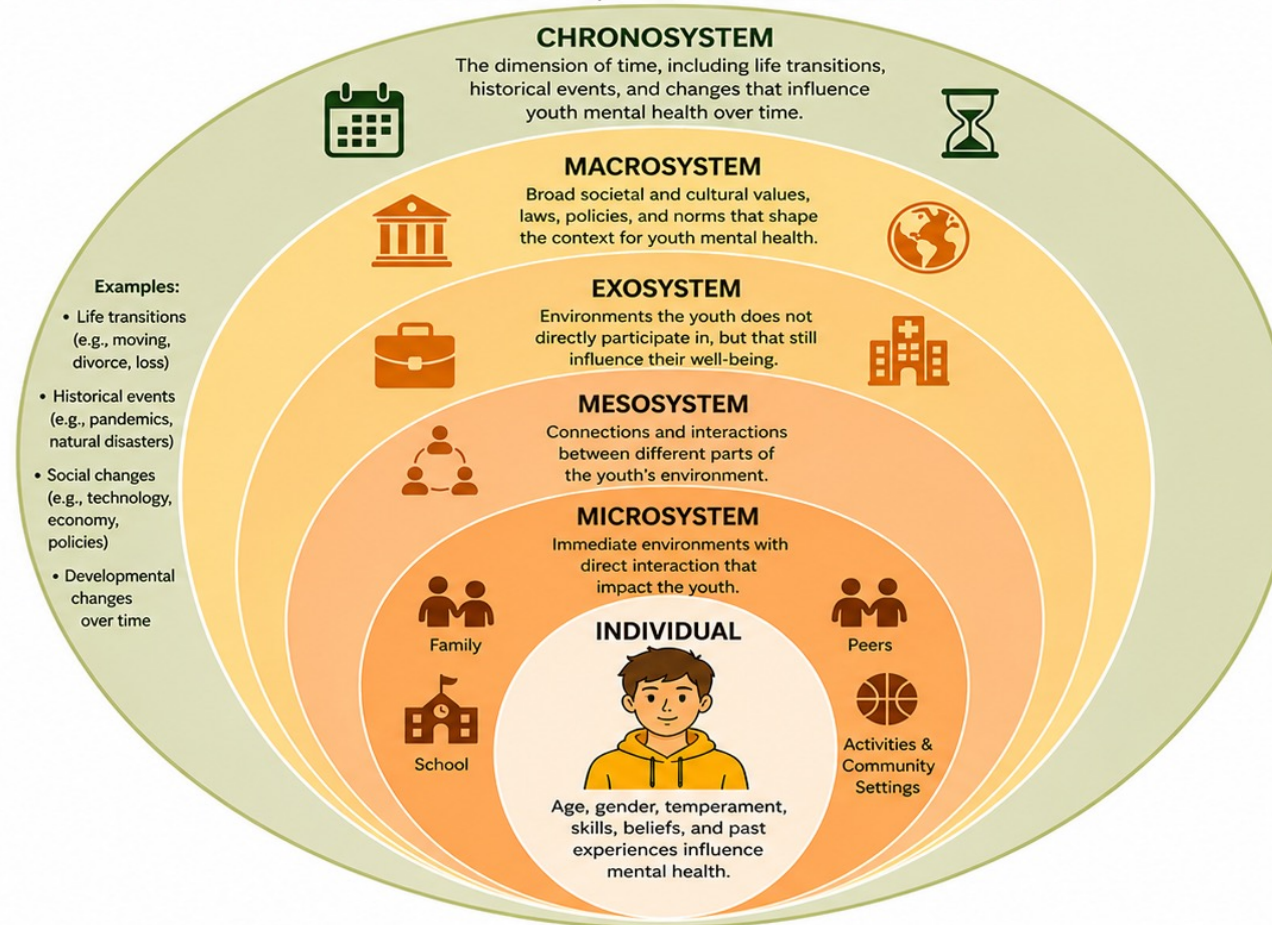


Distress as a Rational Response



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model *and Youth Mental Health*

Youth mental health is shaped by multiple layers of influence, from immediate relationships to broad societal and cultural factors.



The Paradigm Shift: From Individual to Ecological

The Traditional Ontology

- An issue located solely within the individual (Pathology)
- Reactive — waiting for acute crisis and diagnosis
- Clinical waitlists and isolated specialist wards
- Vulnerable youth must navigate barriers to seek help

“What disorder is this ?”

The Ecological Ontology

- The outcome of interactions between multiple levels of influence
- Preventive — early identification of emerging needs (formulation)
- Everyday youth environments (schools, primary care, digital, community)
- The system reaches out and provides low-threshold entry points

“What’s going on for this person?”

Potential Challenges of Early Intervention

Labelling & Stigma

Young person may be defined by diagnosis.

False Positives

Normal variation mistaken as disorder.

Bias & Inequity

Cultural/language differences misread.

Family Stress

Appointments, cost, anxiety, guilt.

Opportunity Cost

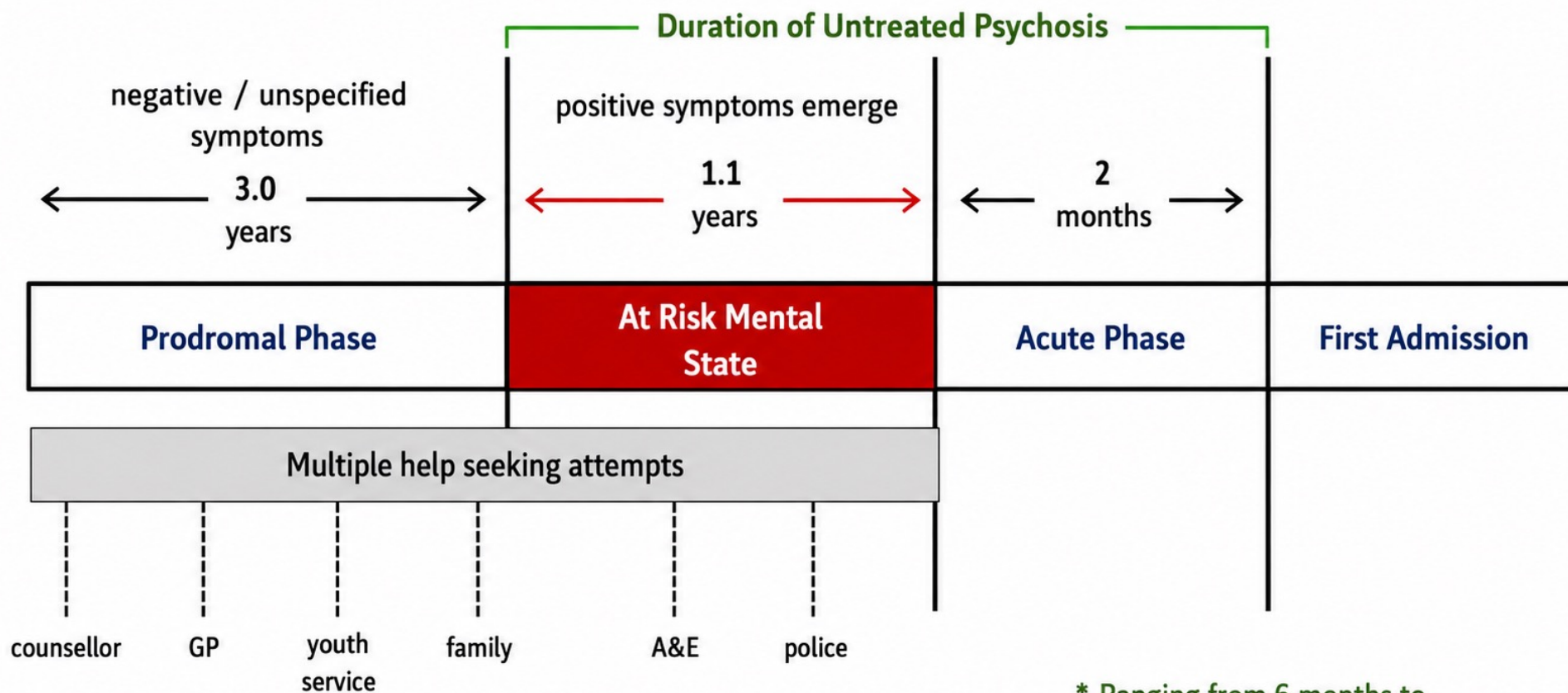
Less time for play and family.

“

The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults.

World Health Organization — Adolescent Mental Health (2025)

Common Trajectory to Treatment (psychosis) (Bettazana, nd)



* Ranging from 6 months to several years

Cost-Effectiveness: The Critical Period Argument

'Critical Period'

Early investment yields the highest return

- Early detection and intervention are important in maximising treatment effectiveness and improving long-term prognosis (McGorry, Mei, Chanen, Hodges, Alvarez-Jimenez, & Killackey, 2018)
- EI has a significant impact on the economic costs of illness to the health service and to society (Sediqzadah et al., 2022)

The Practicalities

Target population, guiding principles, strategic objectives and pillars

Target Population

Primary focus: ages 13-30 in Malta

Recognising transitions across child, adolescent and young adult services.

Priority Groups

Low-income households

Care-experienced youth

Young carers

Parental mental ill-health

Disabilities / neurodiversity

Migrant & asylum-seeking youth

Family violence / substance misuse

Outside education/employment

Guiding Principles

Early intervention with those facing higher levels of risk or disadvantage should be balanced by:

Non-Stigmatising / Rights-Based

Services should promote dignity, inclusion, confidentiality and autonomy.

Ecological Understanding

Youth mental health is shaped by multiple interacting systems.

Youth-Centred Practice

Young people as active partners in design, delivery and evaluation.

Equity

The policy must address disparities linked to poverty, disability, care experience, migration, family breakdown, minority stress and educational exclusion.

Continuity of Care

Support should be connected across schools, communities, primary care and specialist services.

4 Strategic Objectives

1

Detect

Detect emerging needs earlier

2

Ensure

Ensure access to support/services in everyday settings

3

Strengthen

Strengthen the systems around young people

4

Reduce

Reduce fragmentation between sectors

STRATEGIC PILLARS AND ASSOCIATED ACTIONS

8 PILLARS FOR A NATIONAL YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH EARLY INTERVENTION STRATEGY

1

FOUNDATIONAL EARLY INTERVENTION
MODEL (ED&IS) –
EARLY DETECTION AND
INTERVENTION SERVICE

2

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ECOLOGY

3

EDUCATION-BASED
MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

4

PRIMARY CARE INTEGRATION

5

TARGETED SUPPORT FOR
HIGHER-RISK GROUPS

6

DIGITAL WELL-BEING

7

WORKFORCE CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

8

YOUTH PARTICIPATION



THE STRATEGY CYCLE

A continuous process for better decisions and results

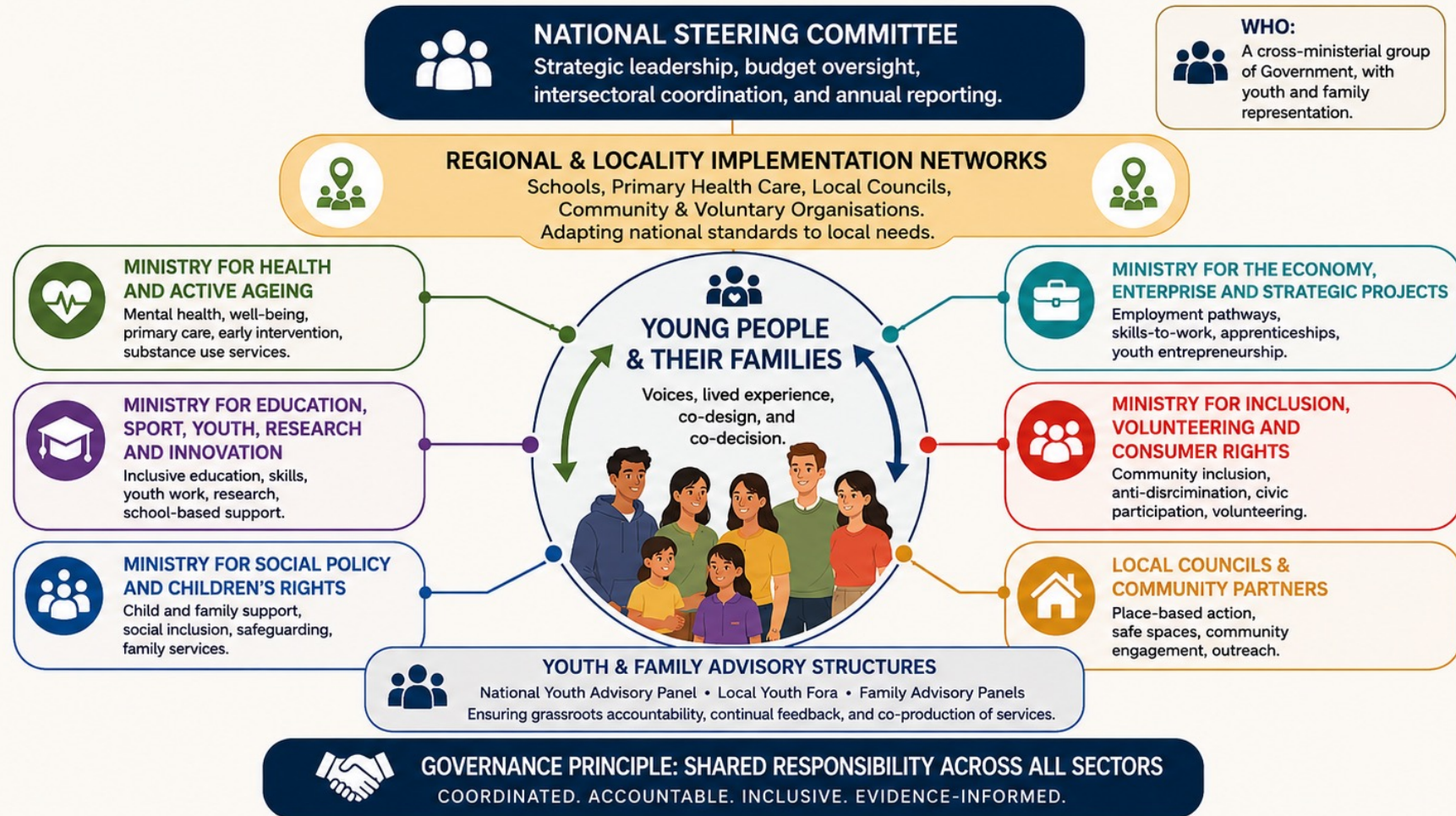


A strong strategy cycle is **continuous**, **inclusive** and **evidence-driven**.

Monitoring & Evaluation ensures we stay on track and deliver results that matter.

Cross-sectoral governance

Implementation that puts young people and their families at the centre



The gains of early intervention go far **beyond mental health.**



A strong early intervention policy for Malta does not merely reduce distress or prevent clinical escalation.



A single ecological framework creates the conditions in which young people feel connected, supported, capable and empowered to flourish.



This is an investment in Malta's social wellbeing and future potential.