

Manifesto submission for 2021 Senedd Cymru Elections

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK. Representing 55,000 practitioner members working across the United Kingdom, and almost 2,300 in Wales, we set and maintain high standards of ethical practice. Our members are a registered, flexible and under-utilised workforce who make a vital contribution to improving the mental health of people across Wales.

Tackling the Mental Health Impacts of the Pandemic in Wales

Counsellors and psychotherapists have played a vital role on the frontline of this epidemic supporting vulnerable people, including medical staff and other key workers who are struggling with their own mental health. Our 2020 member survey indicated that 87.7% of people were able to continue to provide a level of counselling and psychotherapy since restrictions came into place. Our analysis demonstrated that Covid-19 has been a big driver for clients seeking support, with particular focus on

- Concerns about family illness and bereavement (72.9%)
- Concerns about people becoming ill themselves (59.2%)
- Social isolation (78.3%)
- Financial problems surrounding income in their household during the crisis (60.4%)

As the mental health impact of the pandemic grows, we know that demand for therapeutic support will further increase. This election, which coincides with the end of the ten year *Together for Mental Health strategy*, provides an important opportunity to look afresh at the framework for mental health support in Wales, **ensuring people get the help they need, when they need it.**

Our manifesto calls for additional support in four core areas:

1. Improved access and choice in psychological therapies underpinned with greater investment and more targeted support for those who have suffered most through the pandemic.
2. Funding for tiered bereavement support specifically designed to support people who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 or have been bereaved during the pandemic restrictions.
3. Free relationship counselling to lower-income families facing distress from the impact of the pandemic.
4. Strengthening the economic recovery from Covid-19 in Wales by supporting employers, employees and vulnerable groups through counselling in the workplace.

Improving access and choice in psychological therapies

The pandemic has demonstrated the increased importance of the psychological and counselling professions within the Mental Health workforce. Whilst we welcome the increased investment already made by the Welsh Government with the aim of improving access to psychological therapies, many people are still waiting far too long to get the treatment they need. Within secondary care there is a 26 week waiting time target for psychological therapies following assessment. However, a recent report from Health Inspectorate Wales found some people were still waiting up to two years to access psychological therapies.

Extensive analysis has shown that patients who receive their therapy of choice have better outcomes. However, the majority of people accessing psychological therapies in Wales are not offered choice of treatment or a choice on when and where they receive it.

Data is already showing an increase in demand for mental health services as a result of Covid-19 and at a time where workforce expansion is often given as a leading barrier to NHS mental health services being able to expand quickly enough to meet the demands for help from the public, failing to fully capitalise on the skills of a highly trained workforce is wrong.

The voluntary and third sector has responded well to the pandemic, having the agility, skills and people to adapt to the needs evident in the communities which they serve. Third sector counselling services moved quickly to ensure that therapy was available to new and existing clients via telephone and online video platforms. It is vital that the sector is supported to continue to deliver services throughout and beyond the pandemic, building capacity within the sector.

The pandemic has also highlighted clear mental health inequalities, with a disproportionate impact on particular groups in society, such as those on a low income; people with an existing mental health condition; children and young adults, and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. Supporting the mental health of these groups needs to be central to the design and delivery of all Mental Health Services across Wales.

In line with Gofal, Mind Cymru and other partners in Wales we would like to see increased funding and support for psychological therapies to address the increased pressure on mental health services arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. This should also include a commitment to growing the workforce to meet increased demand.

BACP recommends:

Develop a new Mental Health Strategy to build upon *Together for Mental Health*, that is person centred and aims to address inequalities through targeted provision, whilst committing to improving both access and choice of counselling and psychological therapies with additional funding for NHS and third sector providers, to ensure there is capacity to meet growing demand.

Reduce the 26-week waiting time target for psychological therapies over the course of the next Senedd with a clear and detailed timeline that sets out how this reduction will take place.

A commitment to developing psychological professions as an integral part of the future workforce to deliver the NHS Wales Long Term Strategy, underpinned by a clear mental health workforce strategy.

Urgent investment in bereavement support

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the importance of providing a structured range of bereavement and anticipatory grief support incorporating community, organisational and specialist responses. Too many families have not had easy access to psychological support during this most challenging time, extending the distress of the pandemic.

Quality bereavement support includes access to suitable immediate advice and assistance, peer support, group support and online support as well as also structured support such as 1-2-1 counselling and psychotherapy or group therapy. We would like to see this support offered routinely across Wales through a three-tiered community response model which recognises and responds to all who are bereaved:

- Tier 1 delivers supportive responses from existing community networks such as places of worship, neighbourhoods, clubs and societies and offers help and support including peer support and signposting to other services. This should be available for all bereaved people.
- Tier 2 combines the community responses with professional support such as a bereavement support organisation. This will be accessed by some bereaved people.
- Tier 3 provides specialist psychological 1 to 1 or group support which may include counselling or psychotherapy. This will be required by a smaller proportion of bereaved people.

BACP recommends:

We call on Welsh Government to provide more psychological help for the thousands of families bereaved by Covid-19, through investment into a new tiered model of bereavement support, available universally across Wales. Welsh Government should partner with the third sector to develop this holistic offer to those who lost loved ones over this most challenging period.

Supporting relationships and families

Multiple studies have shown that the pandemic and lockdown measures has taken a toll on relationships, particularly amongst the under thirties, as many people have been forced to live closer together with some people and further apart from others.

Extensive evidence shows that adults in poor-quality and distressed relationships are much more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and other mental health problems, and from poor physical health. There is also clear evidence that poor-quality parental relationships and inter-parental conflict in particular have a negative impact on children's mental health, leading to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and effecting long-term life chances across many areas.

Relationship counselling and couples therapy results in a significant change in relationship satisfaction. The cost of relationship counselling - which is not widely commissioned - can be a significant barrier to access for those on lower incomes. At present, the relationship support sector's ability to provide free or subsidised support rests largely on the resource it is able to draw in from clients' fees, which has fallen through the pandemic.

66% of Relate counsellors identified the limited availability of free relationship support as a barrier that inhibits more referrals/signposting between relationship support and debt advice. Whilst we know that high quality support is out there, too few families on lower incomes are currently able to access it.

We believe there is both a moral and fiscal argument for public investment to help address the gaps in relationship support for those on low incomes. A UK government-backed evaluation of UK-wide relationship support found that for every £1 invested the state could see £11.40 of savings.

BACP Recommends:

Support the most vulnerable families in Wales by committing to provide free relationship counselling to lower-income families, through a national model of support across Wales.

Workplace mental health

Prior to the pandemic, we know at least three in ten employees suffer from mental health problems (ranging from short-term depression to chronic conditions), costing businesses up to £1000 per employee each year. The economic challenges stemming from the pandemic and the changing way in how people are working is further impacting on the mental health of the workforce.

Pre-Covid estimates from Deloitte UK (2020) put the cost to UK employers of poor mental health among employees at £42bn - £45bn each year; made up of absence costs of around £7bn, presenteeism costs between £27bn and £29bn and turnover costs of around £9bn. By investing in appropriate interventions, including workplace counselling, employers can significantly reduce the costs of disruption to their business and the wider economy.

Research has shown that workplace counselling can halve sickness absence in organisations and that have accessible services, provided as part of an EAP programme or in-house, return to work sooner, are more resilient, productive and less likely to become long-term sick.

BACP recommends:

Strengthen the economic recovery from Covid-19 in Wales by supporting employers, employees and vulnerable groups through ensuring universal access to counselling in the workplace.

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