

BACP manifesto: Scottish Parliament Elections 2026

**Invest to unlock: mobilising Scotland's
counselling and psychotherapy workforce
to address unmet need**



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The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the UK's leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy. We represent more than 4,100 members in Scotland, a workforce which has more than doubled over the past decade (130% increase).

Our members are a trained, highly flexible, yet underutilised workforce who make a vital contribution to improving the mental health of Scotland's most vulnerable people and communities working across health, education, justice, addiction support and community settings.

Too many people and communities across Scotland continue to struggle because appropriate mental health support is not accessible enough to help them recover. Gaps in the mental health workforce further exacerbate waiting times. Our practitioner members have capacity to do more to help address this shortfall and strengthen the mental health offer in Scotland. Almost half (49%) of our 4,100 members have capacity to undertake 4.3 additional hours of paid work per week. This amounts to almost **460,000 additional therapy hours per annum**ⁱ that could be focused on addressing the growing unmet need, if investment was available to unlock this capacity.

Counsellors and psychotherapists possess a transferable skill set that can be tailored to strengthening national wellbeing workforces. Their expertise in fostering psychological safety, advanced emotional literacy, formulation, and the capacity to contain distress can contribute to responsive and sustainable workforce functioning. In addition, their strong ethical reflexivity and tolerance for ambiguity support thoughtful, person-centred decision-making in complex systems. Many practitioners also bring dual professional backgrounds in fields such as education, healthcare, social work, supervision, and enterprise, allowing them to integrate psychological insight with practical, systemic knowledge.

We call on the next Scottish Government to enable our underutilised workforce of counsellors and psychotherapists to make an even greater contribution to help address the mental health challenges that continue to face Scotland, which have been further exacerbated by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

Our headline policy asks

BACP has five headline policy asks for the next Scottish Government:

1. Use the counselling workforce to strengthen NHS provision in Scotland
2. Better enable Scotland's third sector counselling services to enhance mental health outcomes for all
3. Strengthen and expand the school counselling offer in Scotland
4. Restore vital mental health support for Scotland's students
5. Leadership to ban conversion practices within the next Parliament

1. Using the counselling workforce to strengthen NHS provision

Mental health is poorer in Scotland than it was before the pandemic, with stigma and discrimination still prevalent, support services struggling to cope with demand and a mental health workforce under severe pressureⁱⁱ. This picture is reaffirmed by recent analysis by the Audit Committee into Adult Mental Health Services highlighting that *‘This can be slow, and many people who need mental health support do not meet the thresholds for specialist services, and the availability and awareness of other support, such as primary care mental health services, third sector services and peer support, vary across Scotland’*ⁱⁱⁱ.

We welcomed and supported the development of the Scotland first mental health workforce plan in 2023, alongside important recognition of the counselling professions as a core part of the mental health workforce, within Scotland’s Mental Health Strategy. This recognition, however, isn’t reflected in recruitment of therapists in Scotland’s NHS. Our member survey indicates that 40% of our members want to work in NHS settings but only 10% currently work in health services.

A significant barrier to counsellors and psychotherapists moving into the workforce is the limited choice of interventions offered through psychological therapies services in Scotland.

In England, we’ve worked closely with the NHS to break down barriers to enable services to expand their workforce to include counselling and psychotherapy. This includes increasing the availability of interventions such as Person-Centred Experiential Counselling for Depression across NHS Talking Therapies for Anxiety and Depression services and a groundbreaking funded and salaried NHS training pathway for new counsellors and psychotherapists; the psychotherapeutic counselling core training programme.

The case for expansion of both workforce and choice of interventions in Scotland is strong. The Scottish Government’s HEAT (Health Improvement, Efficiency, Access, and Treatment) targets for psychological therapies aims to ensure 90% of patients begin treatment within 18 weeks of referral. To date this ambitious target has not been met, with performance fluctuating between 78% and 84% nationally. As of the quarter ending September 2025, 80.7% of people started treatment within 18 weeks.

Our policy asks:

- Invest to build the mental health workforce for the future, including providing dedicated funding for training pathways for therapists in NHS Scotland, in recognition of the role of counsellors and psychotherapists as a core part of Scotland’s mental health workforce.
- Work with BACP to pilot an expansion of the psychological therapies model. Which will learn from best practice from the NHS across the UK to provide counselling for depression within an enhanced offer to reduce waiting times.

2. Supporting Scotland's third sector counselling services to further enhance mental health outcomes for all

Scotland's third sector providers, including counselling services embedded in the heart of so many communities, play a vital role in delivering high quality psychological support whilst alleviating pressure on statutory services in Scotland. Community-based third sector services are known to be particularly effective at meeting the needs of people from marginalised community backgrounds, who're often poorly served by mainstream services, leading to further trauma and poor outcomes^{iv}. Despite their key role, their impact and ability to address need is severely hampered by reduced and uncertain funding. This has seen many community-based services reduce their delivery or close waiting lists in the face of rising demand and has even forced some longstanding community services to close, impacting communities across Scotland^v.

In line with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Scottish Mental Health Partnership (SMHP) we call on Scottish Government to implement a fairer and more uniformed approach to third sector funding across the public sector, tied to longer-term planning and true partnership between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

In recognition of the vital and growing role that the voluntary sector plays in complementing NHS provision, we additionally support calls from across the sector for the establishment of a new Improving Scotland's Mental Health Fund of at least £20M in each year of the new Parliament^{vi}. This will complement the Communities, Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund and provide a strategic focus across the public and voluntary sectors on innovative prevention approaches.

Our policy asks

- Third sector providers, including counselling services, must be recognised as core providers of mental health support services. They should be offered sustainable multi-year contracts, nationally and through local health board provision, receiving parity of funding and esteem with statutory services.
- Continuation of the Communities, Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund as well as the establishment of a new Improving Scotland's Mental Health Fund to provide a strategic focus across the public and voluntary sectors on innovative prevention approaches.

3. Strengthening the school counselling offer in Scotland

Evidence has shown that the provision of school-based counselling in Scotland has been a massive success since its roll out in 2019, providing rapid and early intervention support to all children aged 10 and above. The latest annual report shows 8,636 children and young people have experienced an improvement as a result of receiving counselling, representing just under half (50%) of those who have accessed this support^{vii}. A large proportion of children and young people are continuing to access services, helping to alleviate the pressure on more intensive interventions, like CAMHS. Scottish Government has cited this investment as a key factor in meeting its Programme for Government commitment on specialist children's mental health waiting times, with new statistics confirming that 90% of children and young people referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) started treatment within 18 weeks of referral by the December 2025 target date.^{viii}

In June 2025, BACP convened a group of providers across Scotland to access and evaluate the existing programme to inform service improvements. This identified two important recommendations for improvement.

Firstly, the budget for counselling provision, which is distributed to Local Authorities, has remained at £16 million per annum since 2019/20, over a period when all other costs of delivery have increased due to rising overheads, inflation, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. To ensure that this programme remains sustainable we'd like to see inflationary increases reflected in future budgets. This will ensure that children and young people aren't impacted by real-terms reductions in service funding. Secondly, there are concerns about the variability of service provision between different areas. Providers would like to see better defined quality standards and definitions, set out clearly and consistently within a shared framework. This is the approach followed in Wales and Northern Ireland where clearer expectations are placed on counselling providers, ensuring a more uniform offer of support. BACP would be pleased to work with officials to help develop a suitable and practical framework which helps to improve outcomes as we've done in the other nations.

We'd additionally like to see school counselling extended to all primary school children in Scotland in order to address the growing need we're seeing amongst this demographic. The latest available data has shown that almost one in five (18%) children in Scotland aged five to seven are already experiencing mental health difficulties and this rises to almost one in four (23%) of children aged eight to 11. Evidence additionally demonstrates that 50% of mental health problems are established by age 14 so the case to intervene even earlier is strong.

We believe there is strong evidence that could help inform a successful approach in Scotland. The *Healthy Happy Minds* primary school counselling pilot, which ran from November 2021 until March 2023 in Northern Ireland, provides strong international evidence of a programme which has successfully delivered a range of therapeutic interventions. Some 92% of schools who used the programme indicated that they saw a positive impact on the children using these services, which was piloted across 87% of primary schools in Northern Ireland^{ix}. The official evaluation of the programme concluded that the programme was '*very effective and delivered efficiently*'^x.

The return on investment evidence is additionally powerful. Recent analysis by Public First, on behalf of BACP, demonstrated that investing in primary school counselling can yield significant

fiscal benefits in the form of increased tax revenues, reduced benefits spending and reduced pressure on government services including schools, the justice system and the NHS^{xi}. The benefits are about 10 times greater than the cost of ensuring universal access to counselling in primary schools, and eight times greater in secondary schools.

Analysis has shown that primary school provision facilitates early intervention, thereby reducing the strain on specialised services, and most critically enhancing educational and wellbeing outcomes for children and their families. We'd like to see Scottish Government commit initially to piloting a similar approach, to help inform the roll-out of a programme across the nation^{xii}.

Our policy asks

- To sustain the success of school-based counselling, ongoing funding should reflect the increased costs we've seen during the cost-of-living crisis with budgets revised in line with inflation. Without this investment, the existing programme risks instability, impacting continuity of care and staff retention.
- Support the development of defined quality standards and definitions, set out clearly and consistently, within a shared framework for providers.
- Learning from international best practice, extend funded primary school therapeutic and counselling services to all primary school aged children across Scotland initially through a pilot programme.

4. Restoring vital mental health support for Scotland's students

While we recognise the fiscal challenges which the Scottish Government has needed to navigate which massively impact funding for higher and further education, we're concerned that the current Student Mental Health Plan contains no investment in face-to-face provision for Scotland's students. This is in the face of unprecedented pressures on student mental health with rising stress, anxiety, and depression increasingly affecting the wellbeing and academic success of students across Scotland.

The most recent Thriving Learners Survey of Colleges found that 64% of college students in Scotland had low mental wellbeing, with 54% reporting depressive symptoms^{xiii}. The 2021 Thriving Learners Survey of Scotland's University Students showed that nearly three-quarters of respondents reported low wellbeing (74%) and more than one third (36%) reported either moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression^{xiv}. Evidence from individual colleges demonstrates the significant rise in demand for counselling services in recent years. According to Phronesis Research Group, demand for counselling within colleges in Scotland has increased by 1,828% over the last 10 years from 186 in 2012/13 to 3,586 in 2021/22. This rise evidences the recognition among students of the need for mental health support and highlights the importance of maintaining and expanding counselling services within institutions.

Research from over 5,000 students from 65 different UK universities and FE colleges found that 75% of students who completed counselling found that counselling; helped them ‘stay at university or college, improved their academic achievement, improved their overall experience of being a student and helped them develop employability skills’ (Wallace 2012). A further study has demonstrated that 83% of participants found counselling helpful for academic outcomes, with 78.3% of students highlighting that it helped them stay in education (Scruggs et al 2023).

The Scottish Government should firmly commit to restoring funding to institutions in line with the 2018 Programme of Government Commitment to provide counsellors in universities and colleges: this was previously backed by £4.2 million annually^{xv}. This vital programme ended in 2023^{xvi}, and for the current academic year institutions have accessed funding from a Student Mental Health Transition Fund^{xvii}. Ring-fenced, recurring investment is essential to protect counselling roles and ensure continuity of care. A long-term national funding commitment would provide stability for staff and reassurance for students, whilst creating the conditions for clearly recognised referral pathways for learners from college and university support services who require access into mainstream, clinical NHS services.

Our policy ask:

The Scottish Government should commit to restore funding for counselling across Higher and Further Education settings, in recognition of the growing high levels of unmet need among students in Scotland’s universities and colleges.

5. Leadership to ban conversion practices

In line with the majority of parties standing for election this May, BACP opposes any misuse of counselling or psychotherapy to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identification. To do so would be ineffective, harmful and in total contradiction to the ethics and principles of evidence-based, client-centred therapeutic practice. No sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently superior to or more healthy or natural than any other. Anyone accessing therapeutic help should be able to do so without fear of judgment or the threat of being pressured to change a fundamental aspect of who they are.

The need for an inclusive ban on conversion therapy is supported by extensive research. The UK Government’s LGBT action plan included a survey of 108,000 respondents - the largest of its kind in the world. This showed that in Scotland, 7% of ‘LGBT’ respondents and 10% of transgender respondents in Scotland had either undergone or been offered conversion therapy^{xviii}.

There is strong public and political support in Scotland to support such a ban. The Expert Advisory Group (EAG) on Ending Conversion Practices published its [report and recommendations](#), finding that “*conversion practices infringe upon the human rights of individuals, in particular the victims’ freedom from discrimination and freedom from non-consensual medical treatment*”^{xix}.

Our policy ask:

Demonstrate leadership to bring forward legislation that protects everyone who is at risk of harm from conversion practices. Any ban must be inclusive, effective, and workable and shouldn't lead to unintended consequences around therapists' ability to work with gender and sexually diverse clients.

Contact us

For more information on our submission please contact Steve Mulligan, BACP's Four Nations Lead on steve.mulligan@bacp.co.uk

Annex A: Evidence to support this Manifesto

- ⁱ BACP Workforce Survey (2026)
- ⁱⁱ Scotland's Mental Health Partnership (2026), Scotland's Mental Health its Time for Action. Available at https://www.smhp.scot/_files/ugd/145afa_187b60c269f4497f4e1af42447ec67a9.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Audit Scotland (2023), Adult Mental Health. Available at https://audit.scot/uploads/docs/report/2023/nr_230913_adult_mental_health.pdf
- ^{iv} Centre for Mental Health on behalf of the NHS Race and Health Observatory (2026), Trauma informed care and Racialised Communities, available at https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/CentreforMH_Trauma-informed_care_and_racialised_communities.pdf
- ^v BACP. (2024). *BACP Members' Survey to Inform Labour's Mental Health Review*.
- ^{vi} Scotland's Mental Health Partnership (2026), Scotland's Mental Health its Time for Action.
- ^{vii} Scottish Government (2026), Children and young people mental health services: school counselling and community support. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/children-and-young-people-mental-health-services-school-counselling-and-community-support/>
- ^{viii} Scottish Government (2026), Scotland meets CAMHS waiting times commitment, available at <https://www.gov.scot/news/scotland-meets-camhs-waiting-times-commitment/>
- ^{ix} BACP (2023) The case for investing in therapeutic interventions in Northern Ireland's schools. Available at https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/19227/ni_schools_report_2023.pdf
- ^x Department of Education (2023), Post Project Evaluation of Healthy Happy Minds. Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/HHM%20BCS%20PPE%20Report%20-%20published%20version.PDF>
- ^{xi} Public First, for BACP, (2024), The Case for Counselling in Schools and Colleges A socioeconomic impact assessment. Available at: <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/School-counselling-report-1.pdf>
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- ^{xiii} Mental health Foundation Scotland (2022). Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Scottish colleges (2022). Available at https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/MHF_Thriving_Learners_Executive-Summary.pdf
- ^{xiv} Mental health Foundation Scotland (2021). Thriving Learners: Initial findings from Initial Findings from Scottish HEIs (2021). Available at <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/MHF-Thriving-Learners-Report-Full.pdf>
- ^{xv} Scottish Government (2020), More Mental Health Support for Students. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/more-mental-health-support-for-students/>
- ^{xvi} Scottish Funding Council (2022), Funding for counsellors in AY 2022-23. https://www.sfc.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/uploadedFiles/Funding_for_counsellors_in_AY_2022-23.pdf
- ^{xvii} Scottish Funding Council (2022), Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Fund AY 2023-24. Available at https://www.sfc.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/uploadedFiles/Student_Mental_Health_and_Wellbeing_Transition_Fund_2023-24.pdf
- ^{xviii} Government Equalities Office. (2018). 'LGBT Action Plan 2018: Improving the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lgbt-action-plan-2018-improving-the-lives-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people/lgbt-action-plan-2018-improving-the-lives-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-people> (Accessed: 23.05.24).
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