

# BACP manifesto for the 2026 Senedd Elections

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



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### Invest to unlock: mobilising Wales's counselling and psychotherapy workforce to address unmet need

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 3,800 members in Wales, a workforce which has more than doubled over the past decade (103% increase).

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

Too many people and communities across Wales continue to struggle because appropriate mental health support isn't timely enough to help them recover and gaps in the mental health workforce exacerbate waiting times<sup>i</sup>. Our practitioner members have capacity to do more to help strengthen the mental health offer. Over half (56%) of our 3,759 members have capacity to undertake five additional hours of paid work per week. This amounts to almost **550,000 additional therapy hours per annum**<sup>ii</sup> 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 all political parties across Wales to support our call to enable counsellors and psychotherapists to make a greater contribution to help address the mental health challenges facing Wales, 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 administration in Wales:

1. Prioritise mental health, building upon the progress made through the 10-year Mental Health and Wellbeing and Suicide Prevention and Self Harm strategies to deliver stronger and more measurable cross-government action
2. Use the counselling workforce to strengthen NHS provision
3. Enable third sector counselling services to better enhance mental health outcomes for all
4. Strengthen and expand the school counselling offer in Wales to get on top of the mental health crisis facing children and young people
5. Leadership to ban conversion practices in Wales within the next Parliament

## 1. Prioritise mental health and wellbeing

We've welcomed some important milestones since the last Senedd election, to drive forward improvements in mental health support across Wales, including:

- The development of an expansive Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- The creation of a dedicated Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing
- The creation of the NHS Executive and development of a Strategic Programme for Mental Health overseeing transformative change.

However, despite these positive steps, too many people and communities continue to struggle because appropriate mental health support isn't timely enough to help them recover, and gaps in the mental health workforce further exacerbate waiting times.

This is against the backdrop of growing demand for mental health support, and statutory and third sector services are struggling to meet an increased level of complex need. The demand for services for children and young people is also on the rise with one in six children and young people in Wales now having a diagnosed mental health condition, with increasing numbers seeking help through school-based counselling or primary child and adolescent mental health services<sup>iii</sup>.

The lack of robust, publicly available data in Wales also severely hinders the ability to measure the effectiveness of mental health interventions and policies to drive forward much needed improvement.

### Our policy asks:

- Commit to re-appointing a Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing and retaining the 10-year Mental Health and Wellbeing and Suicide Prevention and Self Harm strategies.
- Improve understanding of population-level mental health trends through investing in a specific mental health national survey, similar to the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS) in England.
- Undertake a review of the funding allocated to mental health services and suicide prevention in Wales to inform an enhancement to the budget to ensure it is sufficient to meet growing demand and to facilitate early intervention.

## 2. Using the counselling workforce to strengthen NHS provision

Whilst the groundbreaking Mental Health Measure<sup>iv</sup> has improved access to primary mental health services, many seeking urgent help fall at the first hurdle. Of the almost 70,000 all-age referrals made to Local Primary Mental Health Support Services (LPMHSS) each year, for every 10 referrals made, less than six assessments are carried out<sup>v</sup>. Waiting times for children and young people within LPMHSS are also significantly longer than for adults. The target for 80% of children and young people to receive an assessment within 28 days of a referral was not met in any of the five years to 2021.

Part 1 of the Mental Health Measure stipulates which professionals can undertake Local Primary Mental Health Support Service (LPMHSS) assessments. The 2015 Duty to Review (the Measure) Report recommended amending the legislation to expand the list of health professionals who can undertake assessments to improve access and address some barriers to assessment<sup>vi</sup>. However, no action has yet been taken to deliver this recommendation<sup>vii</sup>.

BACP has engaged closely with Welsh Government officials to inform different reviews of the Measure in 2014, 2017 and most recently in 2023, to make the case that this should be widened to include counsellors and psychotherapists who are registered practitioners under the PSA Accredited Register scheme. We believe it's an anomaly that trained and qualified NHS counsellors are excluded from the list of professionals able to undertake assessments, which can be undertaken by HCPC registered practitioners.

As well as having a negative impact on waiting times, it's an additional barrier to counsellors and psychotherapists securing roles within the NHS in Wales, playing a key role in helping to meet workforce expansion targets in the Mental Health Workforce Plan<sup>viii</sup>, and increasing access to treatment.

Access to psychological therapies remains a significant challenge. Statistics collated by Mind Cymru obtained through Freedom of Information Requests to all seven Local Health Boards showed around 7,500 people were on waiting lists each month for talking therapies across Wales, and an average of nearly 6,000 each month since April 2019. Some months within that time have seen as many as more than 3,000 people waiting more than six months to be seen.

To address this, we call on the next Welsh Government to work with Health Boards to expand the offer of psychological therapies to include evidence-based counselling and psychotherapy, utilising our trained and flexible workforce.

### Our policy asks:

- Commit to expanding the workforce to deliver Local Primary Mental Health Support Service (LPMHSS) assessments to reduce waiting times and improve responsiveness
- Expand opportunities for the counselling and psychotherapy workforce to help to meet workforce expansion targets in psychological therapies and increase access to treatment.

### 3. Supporting Wales's voluntary sector counselling services

Voluntary sector services are often best placed to support marginalised communities underserved by mainstream NHS services.

Targeted funding for third sector counselling services is playing a vital role to alleviate pressure on statutory services - especially for issues transcending the scope of NHS Wales provision - and increasing access to mental health support for marginalised groups requiring specialist, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed psychological support.

However, many third sector services in Wales are reporting increased NHS referrals without corresponding funding. Many of these services risk closure in the current financial climate, which would further reduce specialism and client choice<sup>ix</sup>. It also reduces the voluntary sector's ability to be part of the 'connected system', which is a cornerstone of the current 10-Year Mental Health Strategy<sup>x</sup>.

BACP supports the Wales Alliance for Mental Health's call on Government to enable integrated and collaborative partnership between statutory and third sector organisations, ensuring co-production in the development and delivery of mental health provision.

#### Our policy asks:

- Voluntary sector providers have a vital role to play in the successful delivery of the 10-year mental health and wellbeing strategy and must be given sustainable multi-year contracts, nationally and through local provision.
- They must also receive parity of funding and esteem with statutory services with NHS referrals followed by commensurate funding.
- In line with the Wales Alliance for Mental Health, we'd like to see a new ringfenced 'Mental Health Prevention and Innovation' fund, to explore approaches that divert from, or reduce pressure on secondary support by creating community-based approaches led by the voluntary and community sector.

### 4. Extending and strengthening school-based counselling

Wales has been a pioneer in the provision of funding counselling provision in its secondary schools since 2008, which has been on a statutory basis since 2013. BACP has been pleased to advise the Welsh Government on implementation of the programme since its inception.

In the past year alone, almost 14,000 young people in Wales accessed counselling - evidence that learners are seeking and receiving support earlier. This is easing pressure on more intensive specialist services, with most pupils needing no onward referral, and only 1.7 per cent of learners requiring a referral to child and adolescent mental health services (otherwise known as 'CAMHS').

The compelling case for more accessible early intervention support is growing, particularly considering the impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis on children’s development and wellbeing. In 2020, Welsh Government Ministers commissioned a comprehensive assessment of the benefits of extending provision. This recommended that counselling should be extended to primary school-aged children from four years old, and that other therapeutic techniques such as play, music and art therapy needed to form a core part of an expanded counselling offer<sup>xi</sup>.

We believe there is strong evidence that could inform a successful approach in Wales. The *Healthy Happy Minds* primary school counselling pilot, which ran from November 2021 until March 2023 in Northern Ireland, 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<sup>xii</sup>. The official evaluation of the programme concluded that the programme was ‘*very effective and delivered efficiently*’<sup>xiii</sup>.

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 Welsh Government commit initially to piloting a similar approach, to inform the roll-out of a programme across Wales.

Recent analysis by Public First, on behalf of BACP, has 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<sup>xiv</sup>. The savings are about 10 times greater than the cost of ensuring universal access to counselling in primary schools, and eight times greater in secondary schools. As such, any spend on primary school counselling in Wales will bring a significant return on investment.

Recent analysis by the Department for Education has demonstrated that while outcomes continue to be very strong, there is variance in the level of the service provided across the nation. To help further strengthen the offer, BACP has been asked to undertake a review to help improve the uniformity of support, as well as suggesting amendments to the School Based Counselling Toolkit which provides a clearer and stronger offer of support - underpinned by consistent principles and standards. This review was completed in March 2026, and we’re keen to work with the next administration to ensure its successful implementation.

**Our policy asks:**

- Extend funded primary school therapeutic and counselling services to children across Wales, learning from international best practice, initially through a pilot programme.
- Embed the learning from BACP’s review of Secondary School Counselling to deliver greater uniformity in support and deliver even better outcomes for Children and Young People across Wales.

## 5. Leadership to ban conversion practices in Wales

BACP opposes the misuse of counselling or psychotherapy to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identification. This practice is ineffective, harmful, and contradicts evidence-based, client-centred ethics. No sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently superior or more natural than another. Everyone should access therapeutic help without fear of judgment or pressure to change 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 Wales, 4.8% of cisgender LGBTQ+ people in Wales were offered but did not undergo conversion practices, while 2.1% had undergone it. This was higher for trans populations, with 9.0% of respondents in Wales being offered but not undergoing conversion practices and an additional 5.6% having undergone it. <sup>xv</sup>

We recognise that the current Welsh Government has made important progress on this agenda through their LGBTQ+ Action Plan, which includes a commitment to 'ban all aspects of LGBTQ+ conversion practices' and the signing by NHS Wales of the Memorandum of understanding on conversion therapy in the UK.

We urge the new Welsh Government to progress this work within the next Senedd session and show real leadership on this issue.

### Our policy ask:

- Within its powers, we call on the next Welsh Government to deliver against Action 3 of the LGBTQ+ Action Plan for Wales to ban all aspects of LGBTQ+ conversion practices. Any ban must be inclusive, effective, workable, and mustn'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](mailto:steve.mulligan@bacp.co.uk)

## Annex A: Evidence to support our Manifesto

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- <sup>i</sup> Wales Alliance for Mental Health (2025), Priorities for the Next Welsh Government
- <sup>ii</sup> BACP Workforce Survey (2025)
- <sup>iii</sup> Wales Alliance for Mental Health(2025), Priorities for the Next Welsh Government
- <sup>iv</sup> Welsh Government (2011), The Mental Health (Wales) Measure 2010
- <sup>v</sup> Mind Cymru (2021), The Mental Health Measure, Ten Years on. Available at [https://www.mind.org.uk/media/13351/thementalhealthmeasure\\_tenyearson.pdf](https://www.mind.org.uk/media/13351/thementalhealthmeasure_tenyearson.pdf)
- <sup>vi</sup> Welsh Government (2015), The Duty to Review Final Report Post-Legislative Assessment of the Mental Health (Wales) Measure 2010. Available at <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/the-duty-to-review-final-report.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> Mind Cymru (2021), The Mental Health Measure, Ten Years on.
- <sup>viii</sup> Health Education and Improvement Wales (2023), A Strategic Mental Health Workforce Plan for Health and Social Care. Available at: <https://heiw.nhs.wales/workforce/strategic-mental-health-workforce-plan/>
- <sup>ix</sup> BACP. (2024). BACP Members' Survey to Inform Labour's Mental Health Review.
- <sup>x</sup> Welsh Government (2024), Draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2034 (2024)
- <sup>xi</sup> Welsh Government (2021), Review of statutory school and community-based counselling services. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2022-03/review-of-statutory-school-and-community-based-counselling-services.pdf>
- <sup>xii</sup> 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](https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/19227/ni_schools_report_2023.pdf)
- <sup>xiii</sup> 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>
- <sup>xiv</sup> 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>
- <sup>xv</sup> 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>.