

Whether mental health services for young people will be expanded to deal with concerns expressed during the COVID-19 pandemic

BACP Briefing for Question by Baroness Massey of Darwen on 24 September 2020

1. Introduction

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is pleased to provide this briefing for this very timely question to explore the Government's response to the mental health impact of Covid-19 for young people and we thank Baroness Massey of Darwen for raising this critical issue.

BACP is the UK's leading body for counselling and psychotherapy, with over 52,000 practitioner members supporting vulnerable people across a range of settings throughout the UK. The role of our professional therapists in supporting our young people is now more important than ever, as the nation comes to terms with the mental health impact of changing work and family circumstances, financial insecurity, isolation, bereavement, societal breakdown and prolonged uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 and the associated lockdown measures.

2. The Mental Health impact of Covid-19

Numerous experts have begun to highlight the unfolding mental health crisis resulting from Covid-19 and the physical distancing measures so necessary to manage the spread of the pandemic, which have clearly exacerbated poor mental health outcomes across the population, but particularly for children and young people.

A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that mental health in the UK worsened substantially as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic - by 8.1% on average and by much more for young adults and for women which are groups that already had poorer levels of mental health before Covid-19. A survey of young people by Young Minds in July found that 80% of respondents agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse. 41% said it had made their mental health "much worse", up from 32% in the previous survey in March. This was often related to increased feelings of anxiety, isolation, a loss of coping mechanisms or a loss of motivation. Among more than 1,000 respondents who were accessing mental health support in the three months leading up to the crisis (including from the NHS, school and university counsellors, private providers,

charities and helplines), 31% said they were no longer able to access support but still needed it. Of those who had not been accessing support immediately before the crisis, 40% said that they had not looked for support but were struggling with their mental health.

The fear, uncertainty and loss of routine brought on by the crisis is also having a profound impact on children and their development. The most recent Department of Education summary report of school attendance in England since lockdown began, showed that under five per cent of vulnerable children attended school. Children from poorer families, who are more likely to have existing mental health challenges or to be living in overcrowded accommodation, were particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of school closure and social distancing restrictions. Counsellors and psychotherapists have played a vital role on the frontline of this epidemic supporting vulnerable young people through the challenges brought by the pandemic and lockdown, we are keen to extend this support to all young people, through accessible and universal provision.

3. The Case for expanding School-based Counselling to support our young people beyond the pandemic

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) has consistently called for a national commitment to counselling provision for all children in England's secondary schools, bringing England into line with the other nations of the UK. Access to counselling must also be extended to our Further Education Colleges.

School-based counselling in the UK is based on a non-directive humanistic approach to counselling. Research from four pilot randomised controlled trials has indicated that school-based counselling, as typically delivered in secondary schools, brings about significant reductions in psychological distressⁱ. Research also indicates that it is valued by pupils and school staff and is seen as being able to bring about improvements in wellbeing and educational attainment.ⁱⁱ Economic analysis from an independent trial,ⁱⁱⁱ coupled with analysis of data received from counselling services, highlights that school counselling is also a cost-effective early intervention.

Although access to counsellors is currently being piloted in a handful of 'trailblazer' sites across England, this is geographically inconsistent. The anticipated demand from young people due to the pandemic means we cannot wait for these pilots to be completed, measures need to be put in place now. **A trained, professional counselling and psychotherapy workforce is immediately available to support the nation through the mental health crisis facing our children and young people.**

It will also fill significant gaps in existing and planned provision. The National Health Service (NHS) Long Term Plan includes a commitment that by 2023-24 at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged 0-25 will be able to access support via NHS England's funded mental health services. **This includes the development of new mental health support teams (MHSTs) that will only work with a fifth to a quarter of schools and colleges in England by 2023.** Our proposal aims to complement this existing investment by providing a **cost effective and universal, non-stigmatising early intervention** which will meet the missing middle of support between CAMHS and MHSTs, as well as meeting the needs of the 75-80% of schools not supported under this new model.

4. A cost effective, accessible solution

Earlier intervention is not only more effective, but it makes sound fiscal sense. We estimate that the cost to deliver a single session of school counselling is between £34 and £47. Therefore, the total cost of a child accessing an average of five counselling sessions would be between £171 and £233. This is much lower than the average cost of a referral to community CAMHS - £2,338 and the average cost of an admission to an in-patient CAMHS unit - £61,000.

BACP estimate delivering a national programme of school-based counselling to all state funded secondary schools and academies in England would cost between £76 and £104 million per annum. We believe this is a sound investment. The Department of Health estimate that a targeted therapeutic intervention delivered in a school costs about £229 but derives an average lifetime benefit of £7,252. This is cost benefit ratio of 32 to 1^{iv}.

A BACP commissioned trial by the London School of Economics and the Metanoia Institute into the cost-effectiveness of school-based counselling looked at two groups of students, one who received school-based counselling compared to another placed on a waiting list. The study showed that by the end of the trial the costs for those children who remained on the waiting list were higher than those who received counselling. This takes into account the need for GP appointments, access to pastoral care and other support within the school, access to community services and emergency services.^v

These costs can also be offset by the huge costs of social failure, and associated reductions in welfare, justice and health budgets by giving our young people the best possible support to cope with the mental health impact of the pandemic.

With the right investment in place, school-based counselling is also and more timely and accessible intervention. The average waiting time for school counselling is approximately two to three weeks, often less and rarely more than four weeks. Before the pandemic, the average median waiting time for CAMHS was 188 days. Due to increased demand we anticipate waiting times will be even longer now for those who meet the CAMHS threshold. Benefits of counselling within school also include less stigma attached to accessing services, not having to retell a story to different practitioners and earlier intervention.

5. More Information

For more information please contact: Steve Mulligan at publicaffairs@bacp.co.uk

ⁱ Mick Cooper (2013) School-Based Counselling in UK Secondary Schools: Review and Critical Evaluation

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ British Journal of Guidance and Counselling; Support and costs for students with emotional problems referred to school-based counselling: findings from the ALIGN study 2017

^{iv} Briefing: Children's Mental Health Care in England, Children Commissioner's Report, 2017

^v British Journal of Guidance and Counselling; Support and costs for students with emotional problems referred to school-based counselling: findings from the ALIGN study 2017