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Evaluation of the Welsh School-based Counselling Strategy: Final Report



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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily
those of the Welsh Government

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¹ Ipsos MORI collected data for the secondary head/link teacher survey and were not involved in report writing.

Executive Summary

Overview

In 2010 the Welsh Government commissioned a research consortium led by the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy and the University of Strathclyde to undertake an evaluation of its school-based counselling strategy (the *Strategy*) which has been rolled out across Wales over the past three years. Using a range of research tools, including desk research, analysis of client outcomes, qualitative interviews and surveys of key stakeholders' views, the evaluation sought to describe the implementation and delivery of the Strategy, to assess levels of satisfaction with the Strategy and its school-based counselling services and to examine the impact of the Strategy on the psychological distress of its service users (*clients*). The evaluation found that Implementation of the Strategy and its counselling services was generally perceived as successful by all stakeholders, including counselling clients, with evidence that all key recommendations for its development were implemented. Across six terms, 11,043 episodes of counselling were attended.¹ Participation in counselling was associated with large reductions in psychological distress; with levels of improvement that, on average, were somewhat greater than those found in previous evaluations of UK school-based counselling. Key recommendations are that permanent funding mechanisms should be established to embed counselling in the Welsh secondary school sector, with consideration given to its roll-out into primary schools. Service managers and schools should also look to ensuring equal opportunities of participation in school-based counselling from all sectors of the community, that adequate accommodation is available in schools for the delivery of counselling, and that a system of regular outcome monitoring is established.

Introduction

In the *Clywch Inquiry Report* (2004)² the Children's Commissioner for Wales recommended that all young people in schools should have a trusted adult to talk to about their concerns. Having accepted this recommendation, the Welsh Government commissioned a research team led by the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP) and the University of Newcastle to evaluate counselling in schools across the UK (Pattison et al. 2007).³ This report made recommendations for developing school-based counselling in Wales and, in April 2008, the Welsh Government published the National Strategy for School-based Counselling Services,⁴ informed by the Pattison et al. (2007) report. The Strategy aimed to ensure that counselling services were available in all Welsh secondary schools, along with the piloting of primary school services in four local authorities. Initial funding of £1m was made available in 2008–09, with additional sums of £2.5m in 2009–10 and £3m in 2010–11 to take the Strategy forward. An additional £1.5m was agreed for 2010–11 to expand services and a further £14.25 million has been committed for the years 2011–14.

In 2010 the Welsh Government commissioned a research consortium led by the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy and the University of Strathclyde to evaluate the Strategy over the first three years of its implementation (April 2008 to July 2011). The consortium reported

¹ An episode of counselling is defined as a complete series of sessions undertaken by a service user. A session of counselling is normally of approximately one hour's duration. These are normally held on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

² <http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/2004/060704JDclywch?lang=en>

³ Full report can be obtained at http://www.bacp.co.uk/research/School_Counselling.php

⁴ <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/guidance/counsellingservicesstrategy/?lang=en>

to the school-based counselling steering group, in two stages, with a stage one report⁵ published in July 2011, providing a preliminary evaluation of several key elements of the Strategy. This second stage and final report presents a comprehensive evaluation of the Strategy from its inception, and is a definitive document that encompasses, and supplants, the previous report.

The Nature of School-based Counselling across the UK

School-based counselling, as delivered in the Strategy, is a skilled way of helping young people with personal and developmental difficulties. It is provided by professional practitioners and aims to give young people opportunities to:

- discuss difficulties in a confidential and non-judgemental atmosphere
- explore the nature of their difficulties
- increase their self-awareness
- develop a better understanding of their difficulties
- develop the personal resources needed to manage their problems
- develop strategies to cope with change.

Young people can refer themselves to services or be referred by school staff, other agencies or parents. It is seen as a voluntary activity, and it is not expected that students would be 'sent' for counselling. Young people accessing services are offered a series of weekly sessions within the school day, with the total number of sessions tailored to the needs of the young person, the average being around four to six. Counsellors aim to work closely with school staff and other agencies to provide a service which complements the many other interventions in school that support and promote young people's emotional health and wellbeing.

Aims of the evaluation

The Pattison et al. (2007) report made ten key recommendations for the roll-out of the Strategy. These were that school-based counselling services should:

1. have sustainable funding
2. employ professionally qualified counsellors who have experience of working with young people; who access appropriate clinical supervision with experienced supervisors; who take part in regular, relevant continuing professional development (CPD)
3. deliver accessible counselling in an appropriately private but safe setting within the school vicinity
4. be seen as non-stigmatising by the school community and a normal part of school provision which is integrated into the school community
5. be monitored and evaluated by individuals or an agency (in or out of the school) with experience in this specialised area of work
6. pay due regard to current legislation and guidance, and offer confidentiality within usual ethical and safeguarding limits

⁵ <http://wales.gov.uk/about/aboutresearch/social/latestresearch/schoolcounselling/?jsessionid=pkV7TfTcS1G0GVQXVynSDG1nfQTLBJcQ7fpMn5yBpxQv1PwXP75Ll-1123340228?lang=en>

7. respond flexibly to local needs in respect of diversity (e.g. language) and practicality (e.g. available during holiday periods)
8. work with and alongside other services and agencies in a collegial manner, whilst maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality
9. employ counsellors who are members of a professional body and as such have an established ethical framework and complaints procedure
10. employ counsellors whose personal qualities will mean that they are approachable, have good listening skills and a manner that encourages a climate for safe and trusting relationships.

These have been used in this report as benchmarks to evaluate the implementation of the Strategy.

The aims of the evaluation are:

- To describe the implementation and delivery of the Strategy, the school-based counselling services, and the characteristics of the service users
- To assess stakeholders' overall levels of satisfaction with the Strategy and its school-based counselling services
- To evaluate the extent to which the Strategy achieved the implementation of the 10 key recommendations for its development
- To examine the impact of the Strategy and its school-based counselling services on the levels of psychological distress of its service users (clients)
- To make recommendations for the future of school-based counselling in Wales.

Methods

To achieve these aims, between September 2010 and August 2011, the Evaluation Team developed, and implemented, 10 strands of data collection and analysis (nine in the secondary schools and one in the primary pilots):

Literature review. Review of evidence from previous studies of school-based counselling in the UK
Desk research. Analysis of key reports, letters, minutes from the school-based counselling steering group meetings and proposals related to the Strategy

Client demographic data analysis. Descriptive analysis of the characteristics of service users and their use of the counselling services, based on client data forms

Therapeutic outcomes evaluation. Statistical analysis of data from 3,613 episodes of counselling, examining changes in psychological distress from pre-counselling (*baseline*) to post-counselling (*endpoint*)

Client experience questionnaire. Descriptive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from approximately 600 forms, completed by clients at endpoint, indicating their levels of satisfaction with the counselling service and their experience of it

Counsellors' survey. Analysis of responses from 106 school counsellors to a self-completed paper-based questionnaire, identifying their views on the implementation of the Strategy and recommendations for its development

Link teachers' survey. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative responses from telephone interviews conducted with 158 head or link teachers

Local Authority (LA) Leads' survey. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative responses from a paper-based questionnaire completed by 25 Local Authority Leads or service managers

Case studies. Extensive, in-depth case analysis of the implementation of the Strategy in four secondary schools based on individual and focus group interviews with school staff, parents, pupils, and service users

Primary pilots. Analysis of data emerging from the piloting of school counselling in primary schools in four local authorities based on desk research; surveys of Local Authority Leads and head teachers; analysis of outcome data; and analysis of costs.

Key Findings

Literature review

- Young people attending school-based counselling services in the UK are typically referred by school pastoral staff
- The most common presenting issues are family-related, followed by anger, school-related difficulties and bereavements
- The levels of young people's initial distress when attending school-based counselling services are similar to those recorded at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- On average, around 60% of clients of school-based counselling are female and, typically, from the middle school years
- Clients attend for an average of approximately six sessions, with attendance rates of around 80%
- School-based counselling is associated with large and significant reductions in psychological distress
- School-based counselling is consistently rated positively by a range of stakeholder groups and viewed as a non-stigmatising, easily accessible form of early intervention
- Evidence is limited on the process, or outcomes, of counselling in primary schools.

Desk research

- Schools have been enthusiastic and cooperative in implementing counselling services associated with the Welsh Strategy
- Some difficulties in recruiting Welsh-speaking counsellors have been noted
- Self-referral has been actively encouraged by most local authorities (LAs)
- Counsellors were expected to be registered with a professional body such as BACP
- Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for counsellors were actively promoted by all LAs
- There was some variability in service delivery models used across LAs and in the methods of outcome data collection
- Future developments include the expansion of services and the enhancement of quality standards through accreditation processes.

Client demographic data and costs

- Clients who attended Welsh school-based counselling services were similar in demographic characteristics, and use of the service, to other clients of school-based counselling services in the UK:

- clients were primarily referred through school staff
- the average number of sessions attended per counselling episode was four
- the ratio of male to female clients was 38.2% to 61.8% respectively
- pupils were predominantly from the middle school years: Years 9 and 10
- clients most commonly presented with issues regarding their families; followed by anger, behaviour-related, bullying and bereavement issues
- the most common predominant issues were in line with presenting issues, with issues relating to family and anger being the most frequent
- average levels of distress at baseline were similar to those that have been recorded in young people attending CAMHS services.
- Young people from Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) backgrounds, and with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or disabilities, were under-represented in those using the counselling services
- Just under 5% of episodes of counselling were delivered to Looked After Children (LAC)
- Around 3% of young people were referred onwards to specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), 2.5% to child protection services, and 3% to other services
- There was considerable variability in cost per session and cost per client between LAs.

Presenting and predominant issues by episode of counselling (Table 16 of main report)

	Presenting issue		Predominant issue	
	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total
Family	38.2	4079.0	35.4	3782.0
Anger	17.6	1878.0	12.9	1379.0
Behaviour related	12.5	1334.0	7.7	824.0
Bullying	10.3	1100.0	8.0	849.0
Bereavement	10.2	1091.0	8.8	944.0
Stress	9.1	973.0	8.1	861.0
Self-worth	8.3	889.0	12.8	1364.0
Relationships with teachers	8.0	852.0	3.0	317.0
Depression	7.5	805.0	6.0	641.0
Other	6.3	674.0	5.4	572.0
Self-harm	5.3	567.0	4.8	512.0
Relationships other than family or teachers	4.3	462.0	9.6	1030.0
Academic	4.0	425.0	3.5	377.0
Abuse (including sexual)	3.7	395.0	3.9	419.0
Eating disorders	1.9	206.0	1.8	188.0
Domestic abuse	1.8	197.0	2.3	244.0
Substance misuse	1.5	163.0	1.6	167.0
Sexual (including orientation)	1.4	149.0	2.2	231.0
Suicidal thoughts	1.4	153.0	1.4	148.0
Not known	1.0	104.0	0.8	83.0
Financial concerns/poverty	0.8	87.0	1.5	156.0

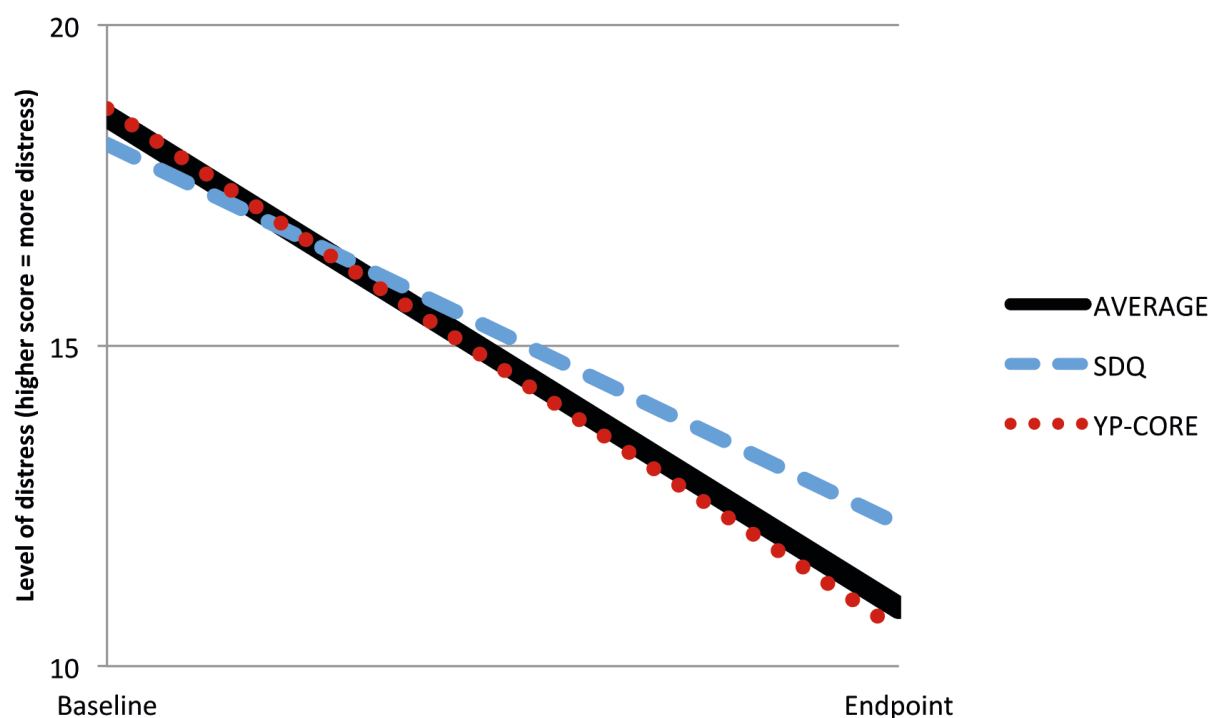
Note: Total percentage is greater than 100% as young people may have presented with more than one issue

Source: Data provided from client record forms supplied to the Evaluation Team by the Welsh Government

Therapeutic outcomes evaluation

- Counselling was associated with significant reductions in psychological distress across each of the LAs for each of the time periods examined. However an association does not necessarily indicate that counselling caused these reductions in psychological distress, other factors may have contributed to this.
- The mean reduction in psychological distress from beginning to end of counselling on the Young Person's CORE (YP-CORE) measure was 18.70 to 10.56 (lower scores indicate less distress), and 18.14 to 12.21 on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).
- The overall mean reduction in psychological distress was large, with an effect size of 0.93 (compared to a UK-wide average effect size for school-based counselling of 0.81).
- There were significant variations in the amount of change across datasets and across LAs. Larger effect sizes were associated with:
 - The use of the YP-CORE, rather than the SDQ, measure.
 - Lower response rates.

Changes in distress: Overall and by measure (Figure 3 of main report)



Source: Data was provided to the Evaluation Team from Local Authority Leads

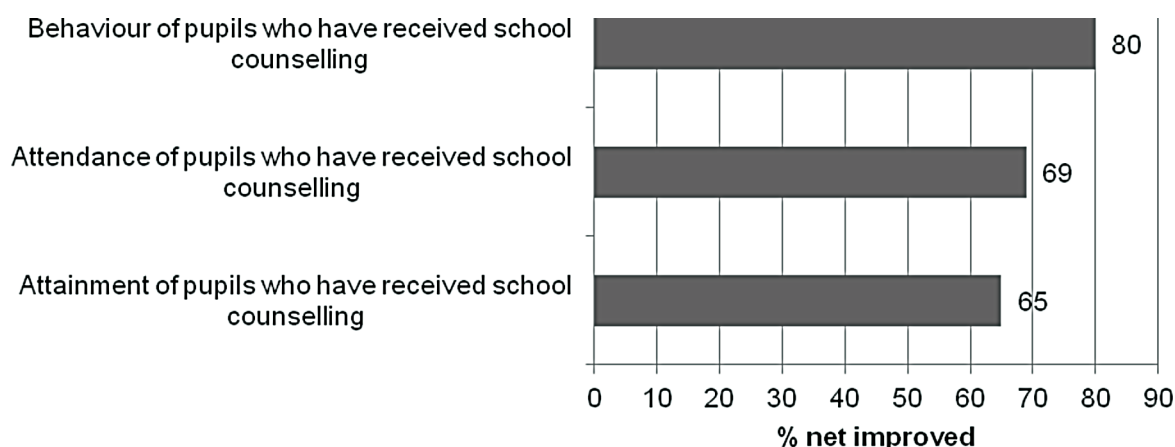
Client experience questionnaire

- Clients' ratings of the counselling service were generally very positive
- Approximately 85% of respondents felt more positive about going to school and more able to cope since going to counselling
- Approximately 95% of respondents indicated agreement with the statement that 'counselling is a good way to deal with problems'
- Around 90% of clients also said that they would ask to see the counsellor again if they needed to.

Surveys of stakeholders: Counsellors, link teachers and LA Leads

- Overall levels of satisfaction with school-based counselling were high across all three stakeholder groups
- Link teachers reported that the implementation of the Strategy has led to significant improvements in pre-existing school-based counselling provision
- Link teachers reported counselling services had made a positive impact on the attainment, attendance and behaviour of clients

Link teachers: Perceptions of the impact of the school-based counselling service on attainment, attendance and behaviour of pupils (Figure 15 of main report).



Source: Link teacher survey

- The Strategy was not perceived as increasing the workloads of school staff
- Perceived strengths of the Strategy were the commitment and support from the Welsh Government and the 'whole Wales approach'
- Some counsellors viewed the process of setting up counselling services as difficult and problematic, in contrast with link teachers and LA Leads
- The lack of counselling in primary schools was seen as a weakness of the Strategy.
- Stakeholders' responses indicated that, in general, the ten recommendations for school-based counselling had been implemented. However:
 - ☐ all stakeholder groups wanted to see the future funding of the Strategy secured
 - ☐ services were not always seen as meeting the needs of Welsh speakers
 - ☐ there were levels of concern about resources, particularly the accommodation that services operate from.
- Key recommendations from the stakeholder groups were that:
 - ☐ funding should be increased
 - ☐ there should be more opportunities for both counsellors and school staff to engage in further training.

Case studies

- Levels of satisfaction with the Strategy were generally high
- Counselling was seen as rapidly accessible, allowing teachers to concentrate on teaching;

projecting an ethos of a caring, supportive school environment; and non-stigmatising

- Counselling was seen as having a positive impact on clients: increasing wellbeing, happiness and confidence; and reducing problematic, disruptive, and high risk behaviours. For example, 'it's easier to educate happier people', '... now I can control my anger ...', 'I'm still in trouble but I'm getting there', 'Now I concentrate a bit more'.
- There was a perceived need for greater availability and more widespread knowledge of the counselling services.
- Concerns about the counselling included limited availability, 'there should be more hours'; limited choice of counsellor (particularly with regard to gender), for example 'it wouldn't be the same with a man'; limited availability of Welsh-speaking counsellors; problems with accommodation; and difficulties in self-referral when specific teachers were acting as gatekeepers to the service.

Primary pilots

- Overall levels of satisfaction with the pilots amongst head teachers and LA Leads were found to be high, and the services were seen as being good value for money
- Although outcome evidence was very limited, initial indications suggested that the counselling was associated with large and significant reductions in psychological distress, with a mean effect size of 0.71 from start to end of counselling. Observers also reported that counselling was associated with improvements in pupils' behaviour, educational attainment and school attendance
- The strengths of the pilots were viewed as: the investment in children's wellbeing, the adoption of a 'whole school' approach, and the use of age-appropriate interventions
- Specific areas of low satisfaction were: limited resources, lack of integration with other initiatives, limited monitoring and evaluation, problems with meeting the needs of Welsh-speaking pupils, lack of availability of counsellor training, and limited publicising of services within the schools
- Not all of the counsellors in the primary pilots were professionally qualified
- Stakeholder recommendations included the provision of adequate resources to meet the demand for school-based counselling in the primary sector; ensuring equality of access across the sector; and an assessment of the costs of various service models before a wider roll-out of services across the sector.

Discussion

Overall satisfaction

Across the surveys and case studies, all stakeholders – school pupils, teachers, head teachers and counsellors – expressed high overall levels of satisfaction with the Strategy. The same was generally true for the primary pilot services. In terms of the ease with which the Strategy has been implemented a more mixed picture emerged, suggesting more problems had been experienced at the service-delivery end of the implementation process.

Service users were almost always positive about the counselling that they had received, emphasising the positive personal attributes of the counsellor, the fact that the counselling was confidential, and that they had someone who would listen to them. In addition, service users appreciated the freedom and flexibility to arrange their own appointments.

Implementation of the 10 recommendations

The findings provided a strong indication that the Strategy has been implemented according to Pattison et al.'s (2007) 10 recommendations, with a small number of exceptions:

- *Sustainable funding:* Although funding for the Strategy has been secured until 2014, key stakeholders expressed a level of concern about the security of future funding
- *Employ professionally qualified counsellors:* Whereas all of the counsellors working as part of the Strategy in the secondary sector were professionally qualified, some of the counsellors in primary schools were not
- *Provide accessible counselling within an appropriate setting: Be seen as a normal part of school provision: Monitoring of outcomes: Respond to the needs of diverse communities:*

Effectiveness and impact

- The amount of change experienced by young people receiving counselling as part of the Strategy (mean effect size: 0.93) was greater than the average change experienced by young people in other school-based services across the UK (mean effect size: 0.81, Cooper 2009)
- Reductions in psychological distress were substantially greater in the young people in the current evaluation than have been found to take place in a 'control group' of equivalent young people who did not receive counselling
- Qualitative and survey data supported the findings of the quantitative outcome data that the school-based counselling had led to a wide range of improvements
- Survey data suggested the introduction of school-based counselling did not add to the workloads of school staff, and qualitative evidence indicated that the existence of such services relieved the pressure on year tutors and other teachers.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The Welsh Government consider the establishment of secure streams of funding for counselling services in Welsh secondary schools
- The Welsh Government consider rolling-out the Strategy to the primary school sector in an age appropriate form
- Local authorities and schools ensure counselling services have appropriate accommodation
- Service managers, schools and counsellors ensure that school students have sufficient information about the counselling service
- Service providers should implement systematic outcome evaluation
- Service providers develop strategies for ensuring equality of access to, and promotion of, the counselling service
- Service providers extend the availability of Welsh-speaking counsellors
- Service providers and schools develop self-referral systems and ensure that all young people can self-refer
- Service providers and schools develop training opportunities for school staff and counsellors
- The Welsh Government develop further research into the aspects of school counselling that predicts improvements and factors that encourage young people to access the service.

This report will be of interest to:

Schools, Local Authorities, parents/carers, families, learners, school governors, health professionals, social workers and voluntary organisations involved with school children

Additional copies:

This document and the full report are available in English and Welsh on the Welsh Government website at: www.wales.gov.uk/educationandskills

Related documents:

School Effectiveness Framework (2008)

Inclusion and Pupil Support Circular 47/2006 (2006)

National Behaviour and attendance Review (NBAR) Report (2008)

Respecting Others Circular 23/2003 (2003) and

Respecting Others Guidance 056/2011 (2011)



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