Providing mental health support in UK schools
Schools today are increasingly under pressure to not only achieve academic excellence, but also to cope with a growing number of pupils who are struggling with their wellbeing. Many choose to turn to mental health services, including counselling and psychotherapy, to help pupils who might not be able to access specialist CAMHS support for reasons such as not reaching thresholds or extensive waiting lists. However, school leaders are not necessarily mental experts and so it can be difficult for them to know what kind of support is needed.

Place2Be has partnered with leading professional bodies, the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP), the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) and the school leaders’ union NAHT, to provide a clear view of the challenges and opportunities facing both schools and mental health professionals in the UK today.

The context

In August 2017, the Department for Education published the results of its research into mental health provision in schools and colleges. The survey of over 2700 institutions found that 84% of secondary schools and 56% of primary schools offered counselling services. Individual counselling was by far the most recommended mental health provision across all school types.

More than nine in ten (93%) of the schools and other institutions providing counselling services used their own budget to fund this provision, making them effectively the commissioners of the service.

Key Findings

Counsellors and psychotherapists
(in partnership with BACP and UKCP):

The survey ran between 6 – 20 December 2017, and received 1,198 responses from counsellors and psychotherapists working with children. It was sent to all UKCP members and BACP members who work with children and young people. It was also listed on the BACP website.

1. 88% of respondents had worked with schools, either currently (64%) or in the past (24%)
2. 34% of those who had worked in schools (either currently or in the past) said it was difficult or very difficult to provide a counselling or psychotherapy service to schools
3. In addition to a lack of funds to pay for the service (61%), the most commonly cited barrier was schools’ understanding of counselling and psychotherapy for children (57%), followed by expectations not being clear (30%)
4. The majority of counsellors and psychotherapists providing therapeutic support in schools work ‘part time’ - 75% work less than 20 hours per week. But 64% would like to do more - on average 8 hours per week.

School leaders
(in partnership with NAHT):

The survey ran between 27 September - 13 October 2017. It was open to both NAHT members and non-members, with a total of 655 individuals responding to the survey.

1. 37% of respondents don’t feel confident in commissioning a counsellor or therapist
2. 45% found it ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’ to commission a service
3. 44% say ‘knowing what type of support is needed’ is a barrier to providing mental health support for pupils
4. Most commonly, schools rely on word of mouth to find a counsellor or therapist (45%), followed by Local Authority or Multi Academy Trust lists (35%), and Counselling / Psychotherapy professional body lists (26%)
5. Schools felt the most important factors to consider when commissioning a counsellor or therapist were experience of working with children and young people (90%), professional body membership or affiliation (76%), and experience of working in a school environment (75%)
Almost half (45%) of schools said it was difficult or very difficult to commission mental health services for pupils, and 37% said they don’t feel confident in commissioning a counsellor or therapist.

Both schools and counsellors and psychotherapists recognise funding as a key barrier to offering pupils the support they need in schools. But beyond this, there is also recognition that where school leaders choose to commission therapeutic interventions, they need more support and training in order to do so effectively and to evaluate those interventions for their schools.

**Barriers to providing support for children and young people**

From the perspective of both school leaders and counsellors and psychotherapists working with children, a lack of funding is the greatest barrier to providing mental health support in schools.

Beyond funding issues, for those counsellors and psychotherapists currently working within schools, the most commonly cited barrier was schools’ understanding of counselling and psychotherapy for children (56%), followed by expectations not being clear (30%). The responses were similar from those who had worked in schools in the past (see fig 1). Other responses included ‘lack of appropriate counselling space’, ‘lack of confidentiality’ and ‘high level of demand’.

School leaders commonly cited a lack of services locally (47%), knowing what type of support is needed (44%) and knowing where to look for mental health professionals (43%) (see fig 2).
Challenges facing therapists and schools

Figure 1

Counsellors and psychotherapists

Most common difficulties encountered in providing counselling or psychotherapy services to schools*

(n=671 currently working, n=156 previously worked)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Currently working in schools</th>
<th>Previously working in schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools not having funds to pay for the service</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools’ understanding of counselling or psychotherapy for children and young people</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools’ expectations not being clear</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to make connections with specialist services (e.g. CAMHS)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools not being confident about using a counsellor or psychotherapist for pupils</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2

School leaders

Most common barriers to putting in place a counsellor or therapist to support pupils’ mental health in school*

(n=496)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Currently working in schools</th>
<th>Previously working in schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial constraints</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of services locally</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing what type of support is needed</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing where to look for mental health professionals</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of physical space in the school</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time constraints</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of professionals with relevant experience of working with relevant qualifications</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NB: Respondents could select more than one response

**Question not asked of this group
The future of in-school mental health support

Previous research has indicated that school leaders feel pupils are bringing more worries into school than they did in previous years. Most commonly schools rely on word of mouth (45%) to find a counsellor or therapist.

There is more that can be done to demonstrate what effective therapeutic support in the school context looks like, and to help schools connect with highly experienced counsellors and psychotherapists. However, funding will continue to be an issue without government support.

Additional capacity

Despite the aforementioned barriers, the good news is that the vast majority of counsellors and psychotherapists who work with children are interested in providing further support to schools.

On average \(3\), the respondents currently working in schools provided 11 hours of therapeutic support per week. However, almost two thirds (64%) would like to do more – on average eight extra hours per week. Fig. 3 represents the range of responses received from those currently working in schools, and highlights that three quarters (75%) are currently working fewer than 20 hours per week.

Furthermore, for those who worked with schools in the past, 69% would like to do so again for an average of 10 hours a week.

In total, our respondents had over 7,000 hours of additional capacity on top of what is currently being provided that schools could potentially access, if they were provided with the funding and support needed.

![Figure 3](image-url)

Counsellors and psychotherapists

Current hours working therapeutically with children and young people in a school(s) per week, and extra hours desired per week

\(n=743\) current hours, \(n=457\) extra hours
Recommendations

1 Funding continues to be the most common barrier to providing pupils with support, cited by schools and therapists alike. We believe all schools should have access to dedicated funding to support a specialist mental health expert or service, such as a counsellor or psychotherapist - as part of a ‘whole school’ approach to mental health.

2 Counsellors and psychotherapists would like to do more therapeutic work in schools; however schools’ understanding of counselling and psychotherapy can be a barrier to providing services. Where schools choose to commission therapeutic services themselves, School Leaders and/or Mental Health Leads must receive appropriate guidance and training to be able to do so effectively and to evaluate school-based therapeutic support.

3 Many School Leaders rely on word of mouth in order to find services locally. We believe schools could also benefit from practical examples of what effective therapeutic support in the school context looks like, based on evidence, and how it can be successfully implemented.

Place2Be is a children’s mental health charity providing expert training and in-school support to over 300 UK schools annually.

BACP is a professional body representing counselling and psychotherapy with over 44,000 members and works toward a better standard of therapeutic practice.

UKCP UK Council for Psychotherapy is a professional body for research, education, training, accreditation and regulation of psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic counsellors.

NAHT is an independent trade union and professional association representing over 29,000 School Leaders in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1 NAHT and Place2Be survey of school leaders, published February 2017. [accessed 16 January 2018]


3 All averages referred to represent the median unless otherwise stated.