

Northern Ireland Elections 2022 - Manifesto submission

Introduction

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK. Representing more than 60,000 practitioner members working across the United Kingdom, and over 1,915 members in Northern Ireland, we set and maintain high standards of ethical practice. Our members are a registered, flexible, and under-utilised workforce who have made a vital contribution to improving the mental health of Northern Ireland's most vulnerable people and communities on the frontline of the pandemic.

We are committed to improving equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) by creating 'a profession for the future', addressing systemic barriers within the profession to improve access to psychological therapies for all who need them.

We have pulled together this submission with the support of the Northern Ireland Counselling Forum, the representative body for the counselling and therapeutic communities in Northern Ireland.

Growing demand for counselling services

- According to BACP's Public Perceptions Survey 75% of people in Northern Ireland say their mental health has been impacted by the Covid pandemic.
- 85% of people agree it's a good idea to seek therapy for a problem before it gets out of hand and the same percentage agrees it is important therapy should be accessible to everyone who wants it.
- Almost three-quarters of people (73%) agree that people might be happier if they talked to a counsellor or psychotherapist about their problems, while 65% agree it's better to talk to someone about a problem rather than to take medication.

Demand for counselling was also reflected in the summary of consultation responses to the Mental Health Strategy, published in May 2020. This stated that 'one of the most consistently raised points regarding community mental health provision was the availability of counselling in GP practices... many responses highlighted the **inconsistency in provision across NI, the long waiting lists, the benefit of easier and quick access to such therapy**'.

A postcode lottery to secure counselling support

Freedom of Information evidence obtained by the human rights group Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) shows two thirds of GP practices offer in-house counselling but from 2020/21 to 2021/22 there has been an overall decrease in the number of GP practices offering much needed therapeutic support.

In the Belfast Trust the percentage of GP practices fell from 70% in 2020/21 to 59% in 2021/22, equating to 16 fewer GP practices across Belfast, offering counselling in 2021/22. In the Western Trust the percentage of GP practices rose from 63% to 83% across the two years, equating to 12 new GP practices offering counselling. Freedom of information data also shows many people wait up to five months for a first counselling appointment, some people cannot access the service at all, and that there is a de facto cap of six sessions.

Summary of our policy asks

We are calling on all the parties in Northern Ireland to include the following five pledges in manifestos for the upcoming May 2022 assembly elections to ensure that growing demand for counselling support is urgently addressed with appropriate and accessible provision.

- To secure the **£1.2b shortfall in the Mental Health Strategy's Funding Plan** and commit to ensuring this will enable appropriate and accessible counselling provision across Northern Ireland to address longstanding gaps in support which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- To ensure a holistic **mental health workforce strategy** is put in place urgently which fully deploys the underutilised counselling and psychotherapy workforce in Northern Ireland.
- Enhance the role of counselling and psychotherapy within the Health and Social Care workforce including **free at the point of need counselling and psychotherapy** available to all through their GP.
- To commit to long term funding of the **Healthy Happy Minds therapeutic and counselling service** beyond the existing pilot, ensuring all primary aged children in Northern Ireland have access to qualified, specialist children and young people counselling practitioners as part of that offer.
- To commit to improving access to high quality and **culturally sensitive services** to people from marginalised community backgrounds and those at greatest risk of psychological distress and mental ill health.

Detailed policy asks

1. Appropriate funding for counselling and psychotherapy

The new Mental Health Strategy, if implemented fully, has the potential to lead to the transformation in services required to meet the needs of the population across Northern Ireland and deliver a single regional mental health service, with improved access and choice of interventions. To ensure this is delivered in full will require a 34% increase in the funding for mental health services.

We fully support the ongoing campaign being led by the Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhan O'Neil and backed by many major mental health charities in Northern Ireland, to urgently address this shortfall. A key part of this investment will deliver the much-needed increase in counselling and psychotherapy support that people deserve and need.

BACP recommends:

We call on all parties to commit to securing the £1.2b shortfall in the Mental Health Strategy's Funding Plan and to ensure this will enable accessible counselling provision across Northern Ireland to address longstanding gaps in support which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

2. Ensuring counselling and psychotherapy is appropriately represented and utilised within the Health and Social Care workforce

Workforce expansion is one of the biggest barriers to delivering the enhanced mental health offer set out in the ten-year Mental Health strategy. Historically, Northern Ireland's Health Boards have overlooked the highly qualified, experienced and skilled counselling and psychotherapy workforce that already exists in Northern Ireland, but who face barrier after barrier when trying to enter the workforce. Analysis from our 2021 workforce strategy shows that our 1915 members in Northern Ireland could deliver an additional **96,000 client hours of therapy per week**, if funding was in place to unlock this capacity. They could play a valuable and immediate role in helping to address the growing yet unmet demand which has been exacerbated by this pandemic.

The implementation of the Mental Health Strategy needs to be accompanied by a comprehensive mental health workforce strategy which includes all relevant professions and utilises existing expertise much more effectively, including the important role played by counsellors and psychotherapists.

BACP recommends:

To ensure a holistic mental health workforce strategy is put in place urgently which fully deploys the underutilised counselling and psychotherapy workforce in Northern Ireland.

3. Ensuring universal access to counselling and psychotherapy in primary care

Even before the pandemic, 40% of GP appointments were related to an aspect of mental health and this needs to be a key focus of investment if we are to address the growing mental health crisis in Northern Ireland. BACP has long supported the NILES in-house counselling provision which is provided across two thirds of GP Practices in Northern Ireland and received £2.3 million from the Health and Social Care Board in 2020/21.

The Mental Health Strategy, published in June 2021, set out plans to expand new **Primary Care Talking Therapy Hubs** to cover all geographic areas and to resource them sustainably. Whilst we welcome this proposal, we would like a clearer commitment that this will build on, rather than replace existing counselling provision, ensuring universal access to trained and qualified practitioners across all Health Boards. There is already strong cross-party support for this, alongside public support as evidenced in the consultation responses to the Mental Health Strategy, quoted above.

BACP recommends:

Enhance the role of counselling and psychotherapy within the Health and Social Care workforce including free at the point of need counselling and psychotherapy available to all through their GP.

4. Enhanced counselling support for our children and young people

Before the pandemic children and young people in Northern Ireland were 25% more likely to have mental health difficulties than their counterparts in other nations of the UK. We call on all parties to come together to agree to enhanced investment. We welcome the Healthy Happy Minds primary school counselling pilot launched in August 2021 and recognise that extending this to the end of the current academic year ensures additional time to gather outcome measures to inform a wider evaluation. Learning from the pilot will further enhance the service primary aged children receive.

We would urge the Executive to consider longer term funding of service across Northern Ireland's Primary Schools beyond the existing pilot. Recent independent analysis from Pro Bono Economics of a service in East Belfast found that every pound invested in counselling in primary school settings results in a £6.20 saving in the future, as long-term educational, behavioural, mental health and employment outcomes are improved. If additional funding is secured, Northern Ireland will once again lead the way as a beacon of good practice across the UK, ensuring the mental health needs for children aged 4-11 are met as soon as possible.

BACP recommends:

We call on the next Northern Ireland Executive to commit to long term funding of the Healthy Happy Minds therapeutic & counselling service beyond the existing pilot, ensuring all primary aged children in Northern Ireland have access to qualified, specialist children and young people counselling practitioners as part of that offer.

5. Action to tackle health inequalities across Northern Ireland

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted significant health inequalities across all areas of society, with people from racialised and marginalised community backgrounds, and those working in frontline health and care roles at greater risk of mortality from contracting the virus. During the pandemic there has been a rise in reports of domestic abuse and Northern Ireland has seen an alarming increase in deaths of women as a result of domestic abuse.

BACP believes that the aim of counselling is to provide opportunity for a person to tell their story, help them to understand themselves better and make positive changes in their life. It is increasingly vital that access to help and support, including to psychological therapy is increased, so that the most vulnerable and at-risk people across Northern Ireland do not become further left behind as we recover from the pandemic.

BACP recommends:

We call on the next Northern Ireland Executive to commit to improving access to high quality and culturally sensitive services to people from marginalised community backgrounds and those at greatest risk of psychological distress and mental ill health.

Contact us

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