



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Cabinet

2 October 2024

Report of the Director of Education – A.D.Thomas

Matter for Monitoring

Wards Affected:

All Wards

Report Title: School Based Counselling Service Update.

Purpose of the Report:

This report will provide Members with an update on the School Based Counselling Service (SBCS) including statutory roles and responsibilities, referral data and outcomes for children and young people, services for school staff, recruitment and retention of staff, waiting times and an update on plans and delivery.

Executive Summary:

School Based Counselling is a statutory service offered to children and young people (CYP) in Year 6 and above across Wales. Since 2020-2021, Welsh Government have committed grant funding to Local Authorities through the *Whole School Approach to Emotional Health and Wellbeing* for services to be extended to children below this statutory school age. In recognition of the growing need for early

intervention services and provision, Neath Port Talbot (NPT) have invested core funding to ensure that children below Year 6 will have sustainable access to counselling and therapeutic support, without reliance upon grant funded money. Despite additional core and grant investment, the increased demand on the service remains a challenge.

The length of time a CYP is waiting to receive direct therapy reduced during 2023-2024 when compared to 2022-2023, although this is higher than in 2020-2021. A key factor in this relates to the increase demand on the service, with referrals almost doubling post Covid from 480 in 2020-2021 to 911 in 2023-2024. However, when pupils receive counselling, the outcomes are significant. In the academic year 2022-2023 NPT SBCS was ranked first out of the twenty one Local Authorities across Wales in terms of improvements made following counselling. It is expected that when the national statistics for School Based Counselling is released by Welsh Government in March 2025, NPT School Based Counselling Service (SBCS) will rank highly for 2023/2024 also.

During 2023-2024 the SBCS supported 843 children and young people (compared to 658 in 2022-2023), over 4686 sessions (compared to 3894 in 2022-2023). Of these, 125 pupils (1549 sessions) were from primary schools and 718 pupils (3137 sessions) were from secondary schools.

This substantial increase in service delivery was achieved by addressing recruitment issues within the service which had previously led to long term vacancies.

Background:

The NPT SBCS is comprised of School Based Counsellors, Play Therapists and a Drama Therapist. In addition to the Manager and Deputy Manager, there are currently 12 full time equivalent school based counselling staff who hold permanent posts within NPT.

NPT SBCS is committed to helping CYP address emotional and mental health issues so that they may rise through adversity, achieve their potential and lead fulfilling lives. This is achieved through the provision of counselling and child therapy from Years 1-13 across NPT. The service supports schools in this joint endeavour through consultation, support and high quality in house training which is available to Head Teachers, Governors, teaching and non-teaching staff.

The work of the SBCS is underpinned by The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013. Under this framework, all Local Authorities in Wales have a duty to provide SBCSs to Year 6 pupils and above. However, since the pandemic and in recognition of the increased need for counselling and therapeutic support to children, Welsh Government have directed Local Authorities to provide a counselling service to children below Year 6. No specification was given as to how far to extend the service, however, in order to ensure early intervention and to meet need, NPT SBCS adopted a preventative approach by extending the service to Year 1 and creating a new school based child therapy model.

Waiting lists for Secondary School Based Counselling and Primary School Based Child Therapy are monitored frequently and resources allocated accordingly. Pupils are invited to complete feedback forms for each area of the service which then informs any changes or continuation of service delivery. Secondary school pupils are able to self-refer directly into the service via the service website.

In addition to support for CYP, the service recognises the importance in addressing school staff wellbeing, through initiatives such as the School Staff Supervision Service Pilot and School Staff Counselling Service.

Recruitment and Retention of Staff

Team members are well supported through half termly one-to-ones, peer supervision, external clinical supervision, team meetings and Performance Development Reviews. Performance Development Reviews are held annually in line with corporate policies and there are regular continuing professional development opportunities provided in accordance with relevant professional organisations such as British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

In line with national trends across Wales, NPT SBCS has previously experienced challenges in relation to recruitment and retention of staff. For a significant period in the academic year 2021/2022, there were 7.7 vacancies. School Based Counsellor salaries are typically nationally lower than those across the wider counselling profession, particularly within the NHS. This makes retention and recruitment of staff challenging; this funding issue has been highlighted to Welsh Government. While additional grant funding has been welcomed, it has created workforce pressures for Local Authorities who are trying to recruit school based counsellors within the same period of time. Again, this has been highlighted to Welsh Government.

However, in recognition of the need to recruit highly specialised and experienced staff, NPT SBCS has recently undergone a job evaluation which resulted in salary increases (from Grade 8 to Grade 9). This created parity with NHS roles and has improved recruitment, ensuring future sustainability of the service. The number and calibre of applicants for roles within the SBCS has increased and there is currently only one vacancy which has resulted from the promotion of a team member within the service. This should enable the service to begin addressing waiting times over the next academic year, whilst considering the increasing demand in need.

Secondary School Based Counselling and Primary School Based Child Therapy Service

YEAR	No. CYP accessing SBCS	No. sessions delivered	No. Primary CYP supported	No. Secondary CYP supported
2022-2023	658	3894	109	549
2023-2024	843	4686	125	718

Impact and Evaluation

YP CORE is an assessment tool used to monitor improvements in emotional wellbeing. During the year 2023-2024, average YP scores showed a significant positive improvement.

In the academic year 2022-2023 NPT SBCS was ranked first out of twenty one Local Authorities across Wales in terms of improvements made following counselling. It is expected that when the national statistics for School Based Counselling is released by Welsh Government in March 2025, that NPT School Based Counselling Service (SBCS) will rank highly for 2023/2024 also.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is used to monitor change at primary school level. Similarly, average scores showed a substantial improvement. National comparative data is not available for SDQ.

Additionally, feedback forms are utilised to gain the views of pupils, parents and schools regarding the service they have received. Feedback is overwhelmingly positive.

Waiting Times

At secondary level, pupils are offered the next available appointment for an initial assessment. The purpose of this assessment is to gain an overview of the pupil's needs, what they would like to achieve through therapy and to assess risk. Those presenting with high levels of risk are prioritised. By working in this way, the service ensures that those most in need are seen as soon as possible.

At primary level, it would not be appropriate to adopt the same practice, as due to the younger age of the pupils, they would experience difficulty in beginning a relationship with a therapist to then have to wait period of time for their next session. This is why the waiting times for assessment and first session are the same for primary.

Average waiting times were as follows:

Whole Service Level Waiting Times

3.63 weeks (assessment)
10.38 weeks (first session)

Primary School Based Child Therapy Waiting Times

8.86 weeks (assessment and first session are the same date).

Secondary School Based Counselling Waiting Times

2.86 weeks (assessment)
10.58 weeks (first session).

Waiting times have reduced by 2.07 weeks for an initial assessment in 2023-2024 and by 3.98 weeks for a first session of therapy. Whilst

this is encouraging, it should be noted that waiting times for a first session are 3.61 weeks longer than they were in 2021-2022.

A key factor in waiting times over 2023-2024 is likely to be the substantial increase in referrals over the last four years.

Please see below for number of referrals each year since 2020-2021.

Year	Number of Requests	Difference
2020-2021	480	-
2021-2022	561	+81
2022-2023	722	+161
2023-2024	911	+189

Since Covid, the service has received almost double the number of requests for therapy from 480 in 2020-2021 to 911 in 2023-2024, an increase of 431 pupils.

In recognition of the substantial additional need, it is imperative that Welsh Government, the Local Authority and the Education Directorate continue to invest in the School Based Counselling Service in Neath Port Talbot.

In order to address the length of time a child or young person waits for counselling, the service is exploring a range of possible solutions.

Missed Appointments

During 2023-2024, there were 47 Did not Attend (DNA) at Primary level and 150 at Secondary Level, totalling 197 missed therapy sessions across the year when pupils were in school. Had these appointments not been missed, an additional 40 pupils could have received and completed their therapy, reducing the waiting list carried over into the new academic year from 47 to 7. Whilst a certain number of DNAs is inevitable, the SBCS will be working with schools to reduce this over the coming year.

Group Work

During 2023-2024, the top five presenting issues were Anxiety, Family, Bereavement, Anger and Self Worth respectively. The SBCS has allocated 2 days per week for 2024-2025 in order to run group sessions around these themes for children and young people. This work has the potential to impact on waiting times.

Placements

Student placements at primary and secondary level will increase capacity through providing more therapy sessions delivered by trainee therapists. Trainee therapists will be allocated pupils with a lower level of need, appropriate to their stage of training and receive high quality in house supervision. This will also create the possibility that through providing a positive placement experience, trainee therapists make wish to work within Neath Port Talbot School Based Counselling Service following qualification, therefore enhancing recruitment opportunities for the service.

Parent Work

During 2023-2024, a primary school within NPT recognised the need to support parents and had identified a range of wellbeing and mental health difficulties within their parent population. It was hoped that if parental wellbeing could be elevated, this may have a positive impact on their children. The head teacher collaborated with the SBCS and through their delegated schools budget, purchased additional input from the service. Self Care group work sessions were run in a community setting and 11 parents attended across two groups. Groups ran for 7-8 sessions. The work was evaluated using the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale.-Whilst both groups began with average scores which are deemed to be indicative of high risk of major depression, they showed a substantial improvement in wellbeing and scores moved out of the 'risk' range.

The Headteacher also reports (anecdotally) improved relationships between the parents attending the group and school as well as improved attendance of pupils of the parents who were involved.

Unfortunately due to school budget pressures, the Head Teacher of the school has reported that they are unlikely to be in a position to fund this work beyond the two groups described above.

School Staff Counselling Service

During 2020/2021 a School Staff Counselling service was created in order to further support staff in recognition of well documented low levels of school staff wellbeing.

During 2023-2024, this service supported 36 members of staff over 115 sessions. CORE 10 is used to monitor change and a substantial improvement in wellbeing was demonstrated using this measure.

Anxiety is the highest presenting issue for school staff using this service. The average wait for counselling is 4.6 weeks and the number of DNAs low at 2 sessions.

School Staff Supervision Pilot

Supervision supports the wellbeing of staff and upskills them in their pastoral role which has increased in complexity over time. Supervision is provided by qualified counsellors and supervisors and this work is underpinned by academic research.

The creation of a School Staff Supervision Pilot began in 2020, with one to one, monthly clinical supervision being provided for pastoral school staff in three secondary schools. This was in recognition of low staff wellbeing levels across the education sector and the link between this and pupil wellbeing. This work also recognised the formalisation of the responsibility of school staff in regards to

emotional wellbeing as highlighted in *The Together for Mental Health Plan*, the '*Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being*' (Welsh Government, 2021) and the *Mental Health Measure Wales (2011)* as well as the low levels of confidence of school staff with regards to work of this nature.

During 2023/2024, this service provided 532 supervision sessions to 92 members of school staff across 8 schools. For this service, the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) is used to measure impact and a substantial improvement in average wellbeing was shown.

School staff accessing this service during 2024-2025 on average reported wellbeing levels greater than the national average for education and staff and the general population on completion of their supervision sessions for 2024-2025.

Feedback from the project has been positive and there are plans to expand this service for 2024-2025.

Collaboration with Partners

The SBCS collaborates well with other Inclusion services and partner agencies which enables children and young people to receive a holistic service through the utilisation of relevant skill sets. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the Emotional Health and Psychological Wellbeing (EHPW) forums. These consultations take place once per term in each school cluster, which provides a reflective space for schools to discuss emotional health and wellbeing related issues.

The 'consultation team' is comprised of a school-based counsellor (SBC), a wellbeing service (WBS) practitioner, an educational psychologist (EP) and a practitioner from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Occasionally, other relevant professionals who have expertise in children and young

people's emotional health and wellbeing (e.g. Cynnydd worker, Education Welfare Officer etc.) may also be present. Additionally, the Manager of the SBCS represents the Education Directorate as part of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing programmes within the Regional Partnership Board. This joint working has strengthened working relationships with local CAMHS services.

During 2023-2024, 81 cases were discussed. Of these cases, 52% resulted in advice for school and 13.3% resulted in SBCS input demonstrating the need to provide direct intervention or more in-depth support in more complex cases.

Critical Incidents

During 2023-2024, the NPT community sadly experienced six critical incidents in relation to children and young people. The SBCS provided an immediate response and presence to the schools affected through providing emotional support to the school community including staff and pupils. The team assessed the needs of the school community in order to inform the response day by day. The SBCS also provided advice and support to the Head teacher and Senior Leadership team regarding how to best support staff and pupils across the whole school during such a difficult time. The SBCS Manager is leading a Critical Incident Working Party which is tasked with creating a multi service/ agency response to critical incidents. This is a partnership between Education and Health.

Financial Impacts:

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Integrated Impact Assessment:

There is no requirement to undertake an Integrated Impact Assessment as this report is for monitoring / information purposes.

Valleys Communities Impacts:

There is no impact or implications.

Workforce Impacts:

There are no workforce implications associated with this report.

Legal Impacts:

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Risk Management Impacts:

No implications.

Crime and Disorder Impacts:

No implications

Counter Terrorism Impacts:

No implications

Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Impacts:

No implications

Consultation:

There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

Scrutiny Observations:

Scrutiny considered this report on September 12th, 2024. No significant questions were raised and no amendments were requested. Members were appreciative of the report.

Recommendations:

The report is for information.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

Not applicable .

Implementation of Decision:

Not applicable.

Appendices:

None

List of Background Papers:

Counselling for children and young people: September 2020 to August 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021)

Together for Mental Health Plan (2021)

Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being' (Welsh Government, 2021)

Mental Health Measure Wales (2011).

The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

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