

School-based counselling – the essential guide for school leaders, mental health leads and commissioners



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Section One

Introduction to school-based counselling



1. Introduction to school-based counselling

What is school-based counselling?

Counselling with children and young people is when a trained professional counsellor, working to a theoretical model, acting in accordance with a strict code of ethics, which requires confidentiality, accountability and clinical supervision, works on a one-to-one basis with a young person, whilst also working to a competence framework set by their membership body.

School-based counselling has been defined as 'a form of psychological therapy that provides young people with an empathic, non-judgmental and supportive relationship to find their own answers to their own problems' (Hill, Roth and Cooper, 2013). This is offered within a safe and bounded space for children and young people to talk through their difficulties within a relationship of agreed confidentiality.

Counsellors work to a core theoretical model, most commonly referred to as a humanistic or person-centred approach, based on the work of the psychologist Carl Rogers who emphasised the importance of the counselling relationship to help develop personal growth. Other models of working can be found under the 'the modalities of counselling' section.

Please refer to section 2 to find out what training, qualifications and competences school counsellors need to have in order to work safely and effectively with children and young people.

The benefits of school-based counselling

School counselling has evolved over the years and can be beneficial in a number of ways. For example, it can:

1. Reduce the psychological distress that children and young people experience as a result of facing a range of challenges and difficulties
2. Offer a dedicated and safe space to talk about difficulties independently and without judgment
3. Help children and young people learn effective strategies and support them in becoming more resilient
4. Help develop positive self-esteem, confidence, social skills and good mental health
5. Improve engagement in learning
6. Reduce the stigma around mental health
7. Provide insight and guidance for school staff on supporting children and young people
8. Facilitate an important link between school, families and other specialist agencies.

There are many creative ways in which a school counsellor can enrich your school community and add value beyond the core role of a one-to-one therapist. The list of possible activities is long and could include giving assemblies, delivering training, running supportive groups, providing a drop-in, educating parents, carers and staff about wellbeing and mental health issues, and involvement in a supportive capacity during critical incident events.

Modalities of school-based counselling offered

There are many ways to work therapeutically with young people. Therapists have a wide variety of titles, however the most common are counsellor or psychotherapist. A school counsellor may have either a counsellor or a psychotherapist training background. Understanding the validity of your counsellor's training, qualifications and experience is an essential part of the recruitment (or commissioning) process.

There are a number of modalities a counsellor may work from depending on their core training, which is most commonly person-centred or psychodynamic. Either modality is evidence based and grounded in theory, as is a cognitive behavioural approach. A counsellor may work integratively within these core modalities:

- **Person-centred** – focusing on the pupil client's current experience of their situation and how they feel about it. Being collaborative and non-directive in sessions, helping pupil clients to find their own way through difficulties. This model is based on the pioneering work of Carl Rogers, a leading humanistic psychologist, whose theory has been further developed over the years
- **Psychodynamic** – paying more attention to the past experiences and relational patterns of the pupil client and how these are showing up in their current difficulties. Helping pupil clients to change these patterns in their present experiences as they see helpful. This model is based on the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud and then adapted by psychologists such as Melanie Klein, Alfred Adler, Anna Freud and Erik Erickson
- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** – working with psychoeducation models of mental health processes whilst thinking about a particular problem to work on with a clear goal of the change wanted. CBT helps recognise negative or unhelpful thought and behaviour patterns and aims to change behaviours as well as developing new coping strategies.

In practice, any of the above models are often applied using play and creative approaches as well as talking therapy, particularly for younger children where play is a primary form of communication. This is one of the many reasons why counsellors need additional training and experience in working with children and young people following any core adult counselling training courses.

Other terms describing counselling approaches could include:

- **Relational** – working in collaboration with the pupil client, understanding their world view and experience, understanding how the quality of the relationship between counsellor and client is key to successful therapeutic outcomes.
- **Integrative** – a careful, bespoke mixture of a number of modalities. The counsellor will use whichever aspects of theoretical approaches are best suited to the pupil client's way of working, thinking and view of change.
- **Pluralistic** – a general attitude of acceptance around valuing the range of therapeutic approaches and that no one approach needs to be fixed or rigid.
- **Trauma informed** – is a specific approach to therapy that recognises how traumatic experience impacts a child's mental, behavioural, emotional and physical wellbeing.

It should also be noted that there are other trained therapists who can work in schools such as play, art, drama or music therapists who, like counsellors and psychotherapists, will be members of their own professional membership bodies. Art, drama and music therapists are regulated by the HCPC (Health and Care Professional Council) and have legally protected titles.

The evidence for school-based counselling

Access to free, timely and accessible counselling interventions for children and young people can play a critical role in responding to presenting mental health issues or psychological distress. Speaking to a counsellor can be a transformative experience for children and young people. It can help them cope with the difficult circumstances they face in their lives – and to go on and flourish in the future.

There is robust [research evidence](#) that school-based counselling has a significant positive impact on young people's levels of psychological distress, self-esteem and achievement of personal goals (Cooper et al, 2021) over and above the positive effects that a school's existing pastoral care provision can provide.

A [study](#) by Exeter and Cambridge Universities, looking at the longer-term effects of school-based counselling, as typically delivered by Place2Be in primary school settings, found significant improvements in children's mental health two years after the counselling intervention took place (Finning, et al, 2021).

With the right investment in place, school-based counselling is a timely, accessible and effective intervention with waiting times for counselling support considerably lower than referring to services offered outside of school.

Research carried out by [Pro-Bono Economics](#) (2022) found that every £1 spent on primary school-based counselling, delivered by Place2Be, generated an £8 saving linked to other economic benefits.



Section Two

Consideration when thinking about employing, contracting or commissioning services



2. Consideration when thinking about employing, contracting or commissioning services

There are a variety of ways to organise counselling provision in your school.

Key decisions are:

1. Would you like your school counsellor to be employed as a salaried member of the school staff body?
2. Would you prefer your school counsellor to come in and work with you as a contractor?

Or,

3. Would you prefer to commission a service?

In some areas there is also the opportunity to work with school-based counselling services provided by the local authority or third sector agencies. These services may be accessible to your school free of charge or provide counselling sessions out of the school day.

NB: the options above do not take into account Government funded school counselling provision currently offered in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, which work on a tendering basis led by devolved government education/wellbeing departments. Rather, these options focus on a school arranging bespoke counselling provision to meet their particular school's needs, or any additional needs. However, professional standards and good practice guidance remain consistent, whatever counselling arrangements are in place.

To read more about Government funded school counselling guidance in Northern Ireland please refer to the [ICSS Handbook](#). In Wales, please refer to the [community-based operating toolkit](#). In England, the Department for Education published their guidance document in 2015 [Counselling for Schools. A Blueprint for the Future](#). This document has not been updated but is valuable as a reference point.

Employing a salaried school counsellor

Some schools opt to employ their own counsellor directly. This means that they are responsible for recruitment and the ongoing safe and effective practice of that counsellor. This includes paying for counselling supervision. It also extends to ensuring that pupils are receiving a high-quality service, which means the senior management will need to line manage aspects of the counsellor's work (see section on supervision and line management). The school will be responsible for paying for appropriate professional indemnity insurance for the counsellor.

A salaried school counsellor forms part of the school support staff structure and will quickly become a familiar member of your school community. This familiarity can help ease any issues with accessibility and approachability for those hesitant about seeking counselling or for staff consulting with the counsellor about pupil matters.

A salaried school counsellor soon becomes embedded in school processes as in the whole-school and whole-systems' approach model to mental health and wellbeing.

Whilst there is currently no standardised full-time pro-rata salary for school-based counselling, advertised positions range from the region of £27,000 to £32,000, depending on experience and/or qualifications.

Contracting counselling provision

A school counsellor employed under a contractor arrangement can be self-employed or they can be commissioned from a third sector organisation, a commercial counselling service or from some local authorities. This can be helpful as it runs on an invoice arrangement and the school pays for an agreed number of therapy sessions, or time spent in school and associated administrative time.

Self-employed counsellor

A self-employed counsellor may be able to respond quickly to changes in demand for counselling sessions or meet specific need, which introduces flexibility in provision. For a self-employed school counsellor there will be no contract of employment, but a working agreement is required.

Schools should check qualifications, competences and experience before any arrangements for counselling are set up.

Generally, a school would expect to pay a figure of £45 to £70 plus per session, depending on the counsellor's rate (which can vary dependent on qualifications and experience). Charges would still be incurred if a child does not attend, the counsellor will explain their cancellation policy. The counsellor may also add additional travel charges if the school is not within their geographical area, and build this into their hourly rate.

A self-employed counsellor will pay for their own insurance and their own supervision, these costs will be built into their sessional rates.

There are a number of counselling directories where counsellors offering sessional and contracted work can be found. This includes BACP's [Find a Therapist](#), the [Counselling Directory](#) or the [TAC Access](#) platform (which only includes children and young people specialist trained counsellors and was set up for commissioners to make it easier to find appropriately trained CYP practitioners).

Commissioning a counselling agency or commercial company

A commercial counselling service will have already approved their counsellor's trainings and qualifications, but schools should still check qualifications, experience and competences for any counsellor working with them, in line with the following guidance: *Keeping Children Safe in Education 2022* (or other relevant safeguarding guidance depending on nation).

If employed by an external organisation or agency, the counsellor will usually have their own line management arrangements in place, with access to CPD, supervision and a network of other counsellors. A counsellor who works for an organisation is still an employee, just not of the school, so will have their own policies and procedures in place. Arrangements for raising safeguarding concerns should always follow the procedures set out by the school. Be aware, there will be additional safeguarding reporting in place that the counsellor is required to do from their agency's perspective. Check to ensure you are familiar with these arrangements, and that you have a contract in place, which clearly outlines what they are providing and the expectations from all parties. Responsibility for recruitment and oversight of the counsellor's practice including their CPD and supervision lies with the provider, and this can be seen as a benefit to some schools as long as it is a quality assured service.

Commissioning counselling sessions from a counselling agency or commercial company may also come with the option of pupils attending counselling sessions off school premises, which may increase accessibility to counselling for some pupils, and there may be additional flexibility in how the service is delivered.


There are a number of well-established school-based counselling organisations operating across the UK as well as more localised counselling services. Finding an affordable and reputable service to meet your particular school or college needs is important.

Counsellor-led service within a local authority

Some authorities across Scotland, for example, have counsellor-led school-based counselling services, ensuring consistent policies and procedures, equitable provision across all schools with senior practitioner counsellor-led line management to support best practice. Responsibility for recruitment and oversight of the counsellor's practice including their CPD and supervision lies with the service.

Access to IT systems

One consideration to take into account for those not directly employed by the school is that counselling staff would benefit from having access to the IT system. Many services are paperless and may need to access online diaries, write up notes or access waiting lists so they can slot different pupils in when they have an unexpected free slot. This aids efficient and effective management of services, access to the school wifi is therefore essential.



Section Three

Qualifications, experience,
competences, and membership
of professional bodies



3. Qualifications, experience, competences, and membership of professional bodies

Qualifications

Counsellors who work with children and young people (CYP) are professionally trained specialist workers. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland courses are overseen by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), in Scotland courses are regulated by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). This means counsellors will have one or more of the following qualifications:

- A diploma or foundation degree in adult-based counselling at Level 4, involving at least four years of studying (part time) or two years (full time), including a supervised clinical placement, overseen by the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- A top-up CYP level 5 diploma if core training was adult based
- A post-graduate diploma, degree or master's in counselling or psychotherapy.

In Scotland, a level 4 diploma equates to a level 7 (higher national diploma) for core adult training with post-qualifying certificates in CYP counselling available.

In order to achieve registration with BACP a counsellor must have a minimum Level 4 Diploma (Level 7 in Scotland) and can train up to master's level.

Some counsellors may also opt to do a post-qualifying top-up diploma if their core training was adult based.

Other counsellors may have completed their core or foundation training in a child and young person-based counselling qualification (not an adult-based qualification). If their qualification title is inclusive of the words 'counselling' and 'children and young people' then they are competent to work safely and effectively with this age group.

Experience

A counsellor can also work with children and young people if their core training is adult-based and they don't have a top-up diploma to work with children and young people. This is achieved through a process of continuous professional development with the counsellor demonstrating the necessary skills and knowledge in working safely and ethically to a CYP competence framework, as outlined by their professional body.

It is advisable that counsellors working in schools are not newly qualified if their core training was in adult counselling. Student counsellors should only work in schools if on placement with a service or agency who have their own policies and procedures in place, with the student receiving the support of a counselling manager.

Newly qualified counselling practitioners on adult courses would only have 100 hours of clinical practice experience, with only up to 30 hours of that experience inclusive of working with children and young people. We would strongly recommend at least 100 hours of counselling experience when working with children and young people aged four to 18, post qualifying. Counsellors working towards BACP accreditation, for example, would be working towards having at least 450 hours of supervised counselling practice.

Counsellors may have a portfolio in working with children and young people in a range of current or previous roles that add to their experience, knowledge and skillset around working with this age group, as well as having an adult-based counselling qualification. We would strongly recommend that these counsellors still need to demonstrate extensive experience in their adult clinical practice, are not newly qualified and can align their competences to the framework mentioned on page 20.

Previous experience of working with CYP is useful but is not the same as doing a CYP-specific counselling training. We would encourage all CYP practitioners to undertake specific CYPF counselling training.

Children and young people competence framework

CYP counsellors work in primary, secondary, special schools, alternative provision and college settings, some may specialise in working with under 10s and others with 11 to 18-year-olds. All CYP counsellors work to a [CYP competence framework](#) as well as an [ethical framework](#), which outline key values, expectations and codes of practice for the counselling profession.

Counsellors trained in adult modalities will work with counselling managers and/or their supervisor to upskill any training gaps linked to competences. Likewise, counsellors who are sole traders and work primarily in private practice will work with their supervisor to consider any CPD gaps. See section on 'Supervision'.

Counsellors providing online therapy, including phone, chat or video platforms have specific training to provide these services safely and effectively. The children and young people's competence framework, has been updated to reflect changes relating to working remotely.

The evidence-based competences provide a valuable tool to identify important and specific professional, legal and ethical considerations and additional skills to those used in more typical face-to-face counselling.

Considerations would need to be given regarding the need to assess the suitability of online or phone therapy work with children and young people depending on their circumstances and presenting issues.

Professional membership bodies

Counsellors and psychotherapists are regulated by the [Professional Standards Authority](#) who hold an accredited register, reviewed annually, with a focus on protecting the public, upholding professional standards and how professional membership bodies carry out complaints procedures.

All counsellors are members of a voluntary regulated professional membership body such as BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy), COSCA (Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland), or NCPS (National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society).

Registration and accreditation with a professional body help to quality assure the counsellor's work and means that they practise within an ethical framework, including having a clear complaints procedure in place. It also ensures practitioners have trained to a high level and have met ongoing CPD and supervision requirements.

BACP has a specific Children, Young People and Families division for members, which is led by an executive committee of BACP members.

BACP also facilitates a UK-wide School-based Counselling Expert Reference Group, whose members have contributed to this guidance.

Qualification checklist

1. School counsellors should be qualified to at least a Level 4 diploma or foundation degree in counselling (level 7 Scotland) with evidence of additional CPD linked to working competently with children and young people; or hold a Level 5 in a CYP counselling certificate. There would need to be evidence that their skillset and experience aligned with their membership bodies' competence framework.
2. Be a registered member of a professional body (not a student member) and have at least 200 hours of counselling hours if their core training was adult based, that is 100 extra hours after qualifying. Upon qualifying a counsellor becomes a registered member of a professional body. This means they have at least 100 hours of student counselling practice, a counsellor working towards accreditation would have 450 hours of counselling experience. Accreditation is a choice some registered members opt for but is not essential when considering employing or contracting a school counsellor. However, in the devolved nations of Northern Ireland and Wales, being an accredited BACP member is a requirement under the funding agreements for independent school and community counselling services. Registered BACP members therefore need to demonstrate they are working towards accreditation.
3. No one should call themselves a counsellor or say they are offering counselling without these qualifications. Counselling is not a protected title, like teacher or school nurse, so it's important to check qualifications. The term 'therapist' can also mean different things to different people and can sometimes be interchanged with the word 'counsellor'. There is also a difference between a qualified counsellor and a person trained in offering 'counselling skills'.
4. Be aware that many counselling courses are focused on counselling with adults and do not include skills in working with children and young people, creative approaches to counselling, training on child development or mental health that is specific to children and young people. It is important to ensure that counsellors with an adult qualification have appropriate further training and experience, including an understanding of child safeguarding practice and processes, to demonstrate that they are competent to work safely and therapeutically with children and young people. This includes thorough safeguarding knowledge – training must have been taken or will be undertaken for this role.
5. Many people may have a counselling skills' qualification, this does not mean they are a trained or qualified counsellor, a counselling skills' qualification indicates learning around being an attentive and active listener without a full theoretical model relating theory to practice.
6. Counsellors must be a member of a professional membership body such as BACP, UKCP, COSCA or NCPS.

Section Four

Processes and resources required to run a school-based counselling service



4. Processes and resources required to run a school-based counselling service

School counsellors should work closely with the designated mental health lead or named link within the senior management team within each school setting. The designated mental health lead (and those with line management responsibilities for counsellors) should familiarise themselves with the ethical framework and professional standards linked to providing counselling services in schools as outlined in section 2.

Line management

Consideration needs to be given to who the school counsellor reports to alongside what the focus of line management meetings will consist of.

A named link from the senior management of the school can not only act as a point of contact with the counsellor, they can also oversee referral and review processes and safeguarding practices, ideally, line management would sit with them.

Line management in schools tends to be around the counselling service systems; such as how the referral system works, monitoring engagement outcome measures, as well as ongoing review of the scale and scope of counselling provision. Clinical work around the therapy is discussed with the counsellor's clinical supervisor in a confidential space outside school.

Incorporating your school counsellor into any wellbeing team structures will encourage ethical collaborative working around vulnerable pupils and a stepped approach to mental health support in your school.

Any line manager will need to have an understanding of the professional standards adhered to within counselling, which can be found here.

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/>.

Counselling supervision

If you employ a counsellor who is then part of your school staffing structure, resources and time must be allocated for them to access an external counselling supervisor as part of their contract of employment. This would include a monthly supervision arrangement with a supervisor of their choice for at least 90 minutes per month, if employing a BACP registered or accredited counsellor. Other membership bodies may have different supervision requirements, for example psychotherapists registered with UKCP require two hours of supervision per month in their first year post-qualifying.

Typically, supervision would be from September to July. The supervisor, sometimes called the 'clinical supervisor' would need to have a background in working with children and young people. Some schools and counselling providers have found a three-way working agreement between the counsellor, the line manager and the supervisor useful, outlining roles and responsibilities for all. Your counsellor can advise on this.

Professional indemnity insurance

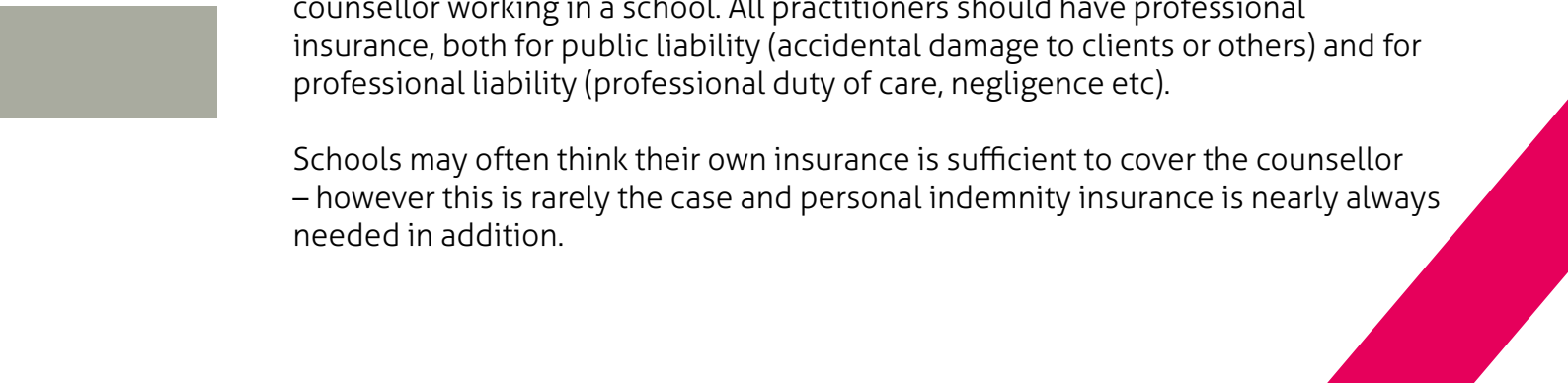
Schools should ensure that all counsellors, whether paid or voluntary, have the relevant professional insurance. Insurance providers vary in their terms. Be aware of the terms on which cover is provided and ask questions like:

- What does the policy cover?
- What does it not cover?
- Does it cover the counsellor wherever they work?
- Does an employer's insurance cover all accidents?

Be aware that if a counsellor is a full or part-time employee in a school, the school insurance policy should cover liability for any accident to staff and pupils when on the school premises, the insurance cover for the school counsellor is worth checking with the school administrator.

Counselling practitioners should also maintain their own insurance policy, which would then provide cover when contracted as an independent self-employed counsellor working in a school. All practitioners should have professional insurance, both for public liability (accidental damage to clients or others) and for professional liability (professional duty of care, negligence etc).

Schools may often think their own insurance is sufficient to cover the counsellor – however this is rarely the case and personal indemnity insurance is nearly always needed in addition.



Section Five

Safeguarding, confidentiality and consent



5. Safeguarding, confidentiality and consent

Safeguarding

Schools will be aware of their local/regional safeguarding board policies and be working in line with this.

All school counsellors must complete a disclosure and barring service (DBS) check in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Access Northern Ireland lead on all DBS checks across Northern Ireland and in Scotland, the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme is managed by Disclosure Scotland. Checks should be renewed at least every three years or in line with your own safer recruitment policies.

School counsellors should be included in any in-house school safeguarding training or additional training provided by their agency. Alternatively, training can be accessed independently via a recognised provider and updated regularly. Safeguarding training should cover a range of learning outcomes ensuring the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, including an understanding around definitions of risk and signs of maltreatment, professional roles and responsibilities, processes for raising concerns, and information sharing.

Clear understanding between school, counsellor and counselling clients is essential as to the limits of confidentiality and the processes to follow when safeguarding alerts need to be made. Counsellors will have working agreements in place with young people that clearly state the parameters of confidentiality and when information needs to be passed on, for example risk to self or others. Counsellors will work with young people regarding how to best share disclosures that have been made and actively seek consent to do this, wherever possible. Counsellors will pass on information when consent is not given if there is a clear risk.

Counsellors 'contract' with clients to ensure that safe, ethical boundaries are maintained. Part of this contracting is to offer confidentiality to the client. When working with children and young people the limitations of confidentiality need to be specified in the contract in age-appropriate language to ensure full compliance with the school's safeguarding procedures.

Whether the counselling service is provided in-house, by a third party or contractor, all counsellors must follow the school's safeguarding policy and procedures. Agencies will also have their own policies to work to, which should align with each school's reporting arrangements.

How to report safeguarding concerns should always be agreed before any counselling work takes place.

Confidentiality and information sharing

Pupils value confidentiality around their use of a counselling service. There needs to be sensitivity around who knows when pupils are attending counselling sessions and how pupils are coded when not in lesson. Pupil clients need to know the boundaries and processes of the service so they can give informed consent to working with the counsellor.

Confidentiality is boundaried and agreed between the counsellor and child right at the start of the work and revisited regularly during the counselling sessions. It is good practice for a counsellor's confidentiality policy to be widely accessible and understood by school staff, pupils, parents and carers as well as other services involved in a child's life.

Dual roles are discouraged as they raise a number of ethical dilemmas, where dual roles do exist careful consideration must be given to how these are best managed and how these are perceived from a pupil's perspective. For example, it can be difficult for a child to build trust if they see the counsellor with various roles within school.

It is expected that school counsellors will share any safeguarding concerns in the usual manner in school, this may be through an electronic system such as CPOMS, or My Concern. The school counsellor can work closely with the Designated Safeguarding Lead and CPOMS lead to ensure that these concerns are noted with restricted access, in line with the counselling contract and GDPR contract, to maintain client confidentiality where at all possible.

Consent

Children are able to consent to counselling without parental consent, if Gillick competent. In England and Wales, the Gillick principle, established in case law in 1986, enables those aged under 16 the right to consent to confidential medical treatment, without a need for parental knowledge or consent. Accessing this right requires the child to demonstrate 'sufficient understanding' to the relevant health practitioner, including a counsellor. Scottish law on capacity is governed by the Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991 (the 1991 Act). Gillick Competence and the Fraser Guidelines are English law and, while they can inform discussion, they should be treated with caution in the Scottish context. Reliance should be placed upon the terms of the 1991 Act. Gillick competence is generally held to hold 'persuasive authority' in Northern Ireland.

The Gillick principle is crucial to the development of child-centred counselling. It consists of two separate elements: the right to consent to medical or therapeutic treatment, if showing capacity to make such a decision; and the right to keep such a consultation confidential from the parents of the decision-maker.

In secondary schools, it is the school's responsibility to notify parents or carers about the availability of counselling services. This can be promoted via the school website, school handbook and other appropriate systems of communication.

When working with children, the counsellor will assess whether the young person fully understands what is involved in counselling and work collaboratively with parents, if appropriate.

A clear system and rationale for involving parents and gaining consent should be in place before any counselling service is offered.

Data protection

Counsellors should follow any data processing guidance set and agreed with by the school. The ICO (Information Commissioner's Office) recommends a Data Protection Impact Assessment ([DPIA](#)) is undertaken, which can be discussed with the school's data manager. This process helps to identify and minimise the data protection risks of the service.

For detailed and practical guidance from the ICO on children and data processing please refer to [Children and the UK GDPR | ICO](#).

A breakdown of guidance is provided on the following issues:

[Approaches to processing children's personal data](#)

[Considerations when choosing a basis to process children's data](#)

[The rules about an information service society \(ISS\) and consent](#) (including exemptions for online counselling for children aged under 13, who can give their own consent to counselling)

[Data sharing and children's personal data](#)

[Exemptions to children's personal data](#)

[What rights do children have?](#)

For a more simplified version of the above guidance please read the [Children at a Glance](#) section.

Members of BACP can access detailed information in [The United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation \(UK-GDPR\) legal principles and practice notes for the counselling professions](#) (GPiA 105)

Good practice in Action resources



BACP members can directly access Good Practice in Action resources via the BACP website, which includes legal and ethical information relating to counselling children and young people, including:

GPiA 046 CAQ [*Working with children and young people within the counselling professions*](#)

GPiA 026 LR [Counselling children and young people in school contexts in Scotland](#)

GPiA 031 LR [Safeguarding children and young people within the counselling professions in England and Wales](#)

These resources are all behind a pay wall but can be accessed via BACP members or upon request. Please contact jo.holmes@bacp.co.uk



Section Six

The counselling service



6. The counselling service

The counselling space

Finding an appropriate room where your counsellor is going to work is an especially important consideration. A counselling room will ideally be permanently set up for counselling activities; contain basic counselling furniture such as comfortable chairs, a low table, a desk and lockable filing cabinets (for storing notes), provide confidentiality by being soundproof, be accessible to all, but away from busy school corridors. A counselling room generally has a small or partially obscured window, which guarantees confidentiality for the client but also allows for safeguarding checks to be made.

Once a counselling session has started it should not be interrupted by members of staff or other pupils, a prominent 'do not disturb' sign on a door is a welcome measure and considered good practice.

Who for and how to refer

School-based counselling should be **accessible for all pupils**. Consideration should be given to the potential barriers to accessing school-based counselling for certain demographic and intersectional groups and steps should be taken to mitigate for this.

A clear system of referral must be in place so that staff know who to contact if they think a child or young person might benefit from counselling. Having a triage system, which maps out the other types of emotional wellbeing support available in school, can be helpful to ensure that children and young people are accessing support at the right level. Schools should provide clear information about what counselling involves for both children and young people, staff and parents.

Schools should consider setting up a self-referral system for pupils to make counselling more accessible. For young people who directly self-refer, the system should be easy and discreet. Members of staff as well as parents and carers should be able to refer too but it is ultimately the child's choice if they can see the value of engaging with counselling provision, they should not be told to do this by adults around them, and they should be given the opportunity to find out what counselling involves so they can make an informed choice.

Expectations about counselling should be realistic, a counsellor should not be expected to 'fix' things but rather provide the space and time to work with a pupil and look at what they would like to achieve through counselling.

Number of clients worked with and number of sessions

We recommend that to stay ethical in their practice, a full-time school counsellor works with a maximum of five pupil clients during the school day or a maximum of 20-24 clients per week, depending on their caseload. Most full-time school-based counsellors would work with up to 20 clients in any given week, as time needs to be built in for administration and other related tasks. Twenty clients is also viewed as a manageable amount to work with at any one time. Counsellors work during term time when the room, support and safeguarding structures in school are available. When working with a maximum of up to 24 clients a week, this takes into account after-school sessions and should be noted is more the exception, not the rule.

The counselling hour is generally 50 minutes but children and young people with special educational needs may require shorter sessions. Careful consideration needs to be given so pupils do not return to lessons midway as this can be distressing for them. Options such as waiting in the school library or other safe spaces should be considered for those children and young people finishing a counselling session before the next lesson or break in the school day.

School-based counselling sessions are regularly reviewed, on average, six to 10 sessions are offered but for some pupils, counselling intervention may be longer. Counsellors will discuss length of time needed with their counselling supervisors, which may affect waiting lists.

Being able to make onwards referrals within school to, for example, mentors, heads of year, support staff, school nurses etc are all useful ongoing support for clients leaving the counselling service.

Administration time

Your school counsellor will also need allocated time each day for administrative tasks associated with school-based counselling, this includes writing notes, arranging appointments, meeting with staff, talking with parents/carers and making referrals. Counsellors working with children and young people with a higher level of need, for example children looked after or on child protection plans may require additional time built into their week to attend multi-agency meetings.

You may also like to consider how much you would like your school counsellor to be included in school INSET trainings, assemblies, group work, and then add these hours to their contract. Ensuring your school counsellor is part of Teacher Training Days, staff briefings and all staff communications will help them integrate into school easier and will help all staff know who they are by having a regular visible presence at staff events.

Access to an appropriate practice network where counsellors can link with professionals within the wider mental health support system is essential. The aim of this is to develop and share best practice, ensure that the counselling being provided is understood within the local area mental health offer, and provide a range of appropriate support to professionals doing this sort of work.

Storage of notes, record keeping and data collection

The counsellor will keep brief, confidential case notes about what has been discussed in the sessions. These will need to be stored in a securely locked cabinet if handwritten, or kept on a secure system if held electronically. Counselling notes are not to be part of the child's education record nor part of a safeguarding recording system such as CPOMS.

This enables effective monitoring of the counselling provision taking place. The counsellor should have a clear framework for recording attendance by young people on a secure and anonymised recording system. This forms part of the overall data collected to inform quality assurance and evidence the effectiveness of counselling.

Measuring impact and the use of routine outcome measures

A number of validated routine outcome measures are recommended for counsellors and clients to choose from and use consistently, which can then be anonymised and summarised in termly reports, depending on what additional data schools require.

Generally demographic information would be collated, how many pupils were seen, which year groups, average number of sessions attended as well as service user anonymised feedback, issues presented in counselling, and any changes indicated by routine outcome measures.

It's recommended that at least one outcome measure be used consistently with young people during counselling, except in circumstances where this is not appropriate (for more information see: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/research/routine-outcomemeasures/implementing-roms/>).

The following tools are freely available, although there are many others which may be appropriate depending on client, counsellor and school need.

The Goals Based Outcome tool can be used with young people of any age group. It provides young people with the opportunity to determine for themselves what a 'good' outcome for counselling might be and can be accessed at: <https://goals-in-therapy.com/goals-and-goals-basedoutcomes-gbos/>.

The YP-CORE (aged 11-16) is a 10-item measure of psychological distress and can be accessed here alongside other key routine outcome measures for children and young people <https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/core-measurement-tools-core-10/>.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a behavioural screening questionnaire for two to 17 year olds. There are several different versions available depending on the age of the young person and who is completing the measure (young person, parent or teacher). This is a longer tool (25+ items) and therefore may be less appropriate for sessional use, however, it is quite widely used within the field. Whilst paper versions of the SDQ are free for independent practitioners or non-profit organisations to use, there are additional copyright restrictions to be aware of, and we'd recommend that you familiarise yourself with these prior to use. Copies of the measure and further information can be found at:

<https://www.sdqinfo.org/>.

Any measures used should be age appropriate and the counsellor should feel competent to use and interpret them safely and effectively.

The Experience of Service Questionnaire is a good way of collecting feedback from children and can be found here <https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-experience-measures/experience-of-service-questionnaire-esq/>.

A paperwork checklist for counselling:

- Leaflet about counselling for staff, pupils and parents/carers
- A referral form
- An assessment form
- A record-keeping form/review form
- Outcome measure forms
- Form to share anonymous data with school (including demographics)
- Evaluation form
- Report form template
- Inclusion in school planner, noticeboards, website, prospectuses and social media.

Working with other mental health services

The school counsellor together with the designated school lead will sense check the suitability for access to the counselling service. Although school-based counselling would be appropriate for most young people, careful consideration should be given to those already involved with other mental health services, ranging from mental health support teams in England, higher tiered child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), or other psychiatric services.

School-based counselling can be an important support for those children and young people who are waiting to transition to CAMHS or for when CAMHS work comes to an end. It is important to note that, once assessed, the support offer from CAMHS may not include regular access to therapeutic support and therefore there will be some children and young people who will benefit from both simultaneously, if a clear agreement can be made with good communication between services.

The school counsellor is likely to form positive relationships with a full range of local community support services including school nurses, GP surgeries, CAMHS, children's services, drugs teams, youth workers, local third sector providers and charities.

Lastly, school counsellors should understand the referral routes into CAMHS and other support services, this may be via Single Points of Access (SPA) systems, or the like. When making a referral to more specialist, higher tiered mental health services, school counsellors would ideally fill in any paperwork in collaboration with the child or young person, agreeing what information is shared. Any CAMHS referral carried out by the school counsellor would focus on ensuring the local threshold for the service is clearly met.