

Manifesto submission for 2021 Scottish Parliament Elections

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK. Representing 55,000 practitioner members working across the United Kingdom, and almost 2,400 in Scotland, we set and maintain high standards of ethical practice. Our members are a registered, flexible and under-utilised workforce who make a vital contribution to improving the mental health of people across Scotland.

Tackling the Mental Health Impacts of the Pandemic in Scotland

The Scottish government's Mental Health Directorate has reported that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on mental health and wellbeing across the nation's population and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Counsellors and psychotherapists have played a vital role on the frontline of this epidemic across Scotland. They are supporting vulnerable people, including medical staff and other key workers who are struggling with their own mental health. Our 2020 member survey indicated that 87.7% of therapists were able to continue to provide a level of counselling and psychotherapy since restrictions came into place, despite falling referrals. Our analysis demonstrated that Covid-19 has been a big driver for clients seeking support, with particular focus on

- Concerns about family illness and bereavement (72.9%)
- Concerns about people becoming ill themselves (59.2%)
- Social isolation (78.3%)
- Financial problems surrounding income in their household during the crisis (60.4%)

As the mental health impact of the pandemic grows, we know that demand for therapeutic support will further increase across Scotland. This election, provides an important opportunity as the next Scottish Government has the critical task of rebuilding the nation and to look afresh at the framework for mental health support in Scotland, **ensuring people get the help they need, when they need it.**

Our manifesto calls for additional support in five core areas:

1. Improved access and choice in psychological therapies underpinned with greater investment in NHS Scotland's talking therapies workforce and more accessible community provision, with targeted support for those who have suffered most through the pandemic.

2. Funding for tiered community-based bereavement support specifically designed to support people who have lost loved ones to Covid-19 or have been bereaved during the pandemic restrictions.
3. Free relationship counselling to lower-income families facing distress from the impact of the pandemic.
4. Build on the Scottish Government's important commitments on tackling drug deaths, ensuring psychological support reaches the individuals, families and communities most at risk.
5. Strengthen Scotland's economic recovery from Covid-19 by supporting employers, employees and vulnerable groups through counselling in the workplace

Improving access and choice in psychological therapies

The pandemic has demonstrated the increased importance of the psychological and counselling professions within Scotland's Mental Health workforce. Whilst we welcome the increased investment already made by the Scottish Government with the aim of improving access to counselling and psychological therapies, particularly across Education settings, many people are still waiting far too long to get the treatment they need.

On average, around a quarter of adults seeking mental health support in Scotland will wait over four months for their first therapy appointment and some are left on waiting lists for over a year. A recent survey by the Scottish Association for Mental Health found that 48% indicated that they had not been referred for therapy after seeking help for their mental health, and 46% were not offered any choice of support.

The voluntary and third sector has responded well to the pandemic, having the agility, skills and people to adapt to the needs evident in the communities which they serve. Third sector counselling services moved quickly to ensure that therapy was available to new and existing clients via telephone and online video platforms. It is vital that the sector is supported to continue to deliver services throughout and beyond the pandemic, building capacity within the sector.

In line with the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) we would like to see increased funding and support for counselling and psychological therapies to address the increased pressure on mental health services arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and give people a choice of treatment to aid their recovery. We support SAMH's call for an expanded network of psychological wellbeing support, including counsellors, based within the third and voluntary sector, which can be accessed quickly through self-referral, community-based triage or GP referral. This should also include a commitment to growing the NHS mental health workforce to meet increased demand.

Data is already showing an increase in demand for mental health services as a result of Covid-19 and at a time where workforce expansion is often given as a leading barrier to NHS mental health services being able to expand quickly enough to meet the demands for help from the public. We would like NHS Scotland to capitalise on the skills of our highly trained workforce of therapists to help meet this urgent and growing demand.

The pandemic has also highlighted clear mental health inequalities, with a disproportionate impact on people on low incomes; people with an existing mental health condition; children and young adults and people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

Supporting the mental health of these people needs to be central to the design and delivery of all mental health services across Scotland.

BACP recommends:

We call on the next Scottish Government to increase access and choice of psychological therapies through an expanded network of psychological wellbeing support, including counsellors, based within the third and voluntary sector that can be accessed quickly through self-referral, community based triage or GP referral. A particular focus should be put on supporting those most vulnerable individuals and communities who have suffered most during the pandemic

A commitment to expanding and developing the counselling and psychological professions as an integral part of the future NHS Scotland workforce, underpinned by a new mental health workforce strategy for Scotland.

Urgent investment in bereavement support

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the importance of providing a structured range of bereavement and anticipatory grief support incorporating community, organisational and specialist responses. Too many families across Scotland have not had easy access to psychological support during this most challenging time, extending the distress of the pandemic.

Quality bereavement support includes access to suitable immediate advice and assistance, peer support, group support and online support as well as also structured support such as 1-2-1 counselling and psychotherapy or group therapy. We would like to see this support offered routinely across Scotland through a three-tiered community response model which recognises and responds to all who are bereaved:

- Tier 1 delivers supportive responses from existing community networks such as places of worship, neighbourhoods, clubs and societies and offers help and support including peer support and signposting to other services. This should be available for all bereaved people.
- Tier 2 combines the community responses with professional support such as a bereavement support organisation. This will be accessed by some bereaved people.
- Tier 3 provides specialist psychological 1 to 1 or group support which may include counselling or psychotherapy. This will be required by a smaller proportion of bereaved people.

BACP recommends:

We call on the next Scottish Government to provide more psychological help for the thousands of families bereaved by Covid-19, through investment into a new tiered model of bereavement support, available universally across Scotland. The next Scottish Government should partner with local communities and the third sector to develop this holistic offer to those who lost loved ones over this most challenging period.

Supporting relationships and families

Multiple studies have shown that the pandemic and lockdown measures has taken a toll on relationships in Scotland, particularly amongst the under thirties, as many people have been forced to live closer together with some people, and further apart from others.

Extensive evidence shows that adults in poor-quality and distressed relationships are much more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and other mental health problems, and from poor physical health. There is also clear evidence that poor-quality parental relationships and inter-parental conflict in particular have a negative impact on children's mental health, leading to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and effecting long-term life chances across many areas.

Relationship counselling and couples therapy results in a significant change in relationship satisfaction. The cost of relationship counselling - which is not widely commissioned - can be a significant barrier to access for those on lower incomes. At present, the relationship support sector's ability to provide free or subsidised support rests largely on the resource it is able to draw in from clients' fees, which has fallen through the pandemic.

66% of Relate counsellors identified the limited availability of free relationship support as a barrier that inhibits more referrals/signposting between relationship support and debt advice. Whilst we know that high quality support is out there, too few families on lower incomes are currently able to access it.

We believe there is both a moral and fiscal argument for public investment to help address the gaps in relationship support for those on low incomes. A UK government-backed evaluation of UK-wide relationship support found that for every £1 invested the state could see £11.40 of savings.

BACP Recommends:

Support the most vulnerable families in Scotland by committing to provide free relationship counselling to lower-income families, through a national model of support across the nation.

Psychological community support to tackle the drug deaths crisis

BACP welcomes the important commitment made by the current Scottish Government, in January 2021, to pledge an extra £250 million over the next five years to help reduce drug-related deaths.

Evidence has shown that direct access to professional counselling services can play a significant part in helping tackle addiction as well as healing the family and community members who are directly affected by these unfortunate and preventable deaths.

We are particularly pleased to see additional support will be provided to the third sector and grassroots organisations to undertake this important work in local communities across Scotland. We hope that this increased investment will deliver more sustainable funding for counselling services, giving people greater access to the psychological support they desperately need on their recovery journey.

BACP recommends:

We would like to see a firm plan in place from the next Scottish Government which ensures that much needed counselling and psychological support reaches those individuals, families and communities most at risk from Scotland's drug death's crisis.

Workplace mental health

Prior to the pandemic, we know at least three in ten employees suffer from mental health problems (ranging from short-term depression to chronic conditions), costing businesses up to £1000 per employee each year. The economic challenges stemming from the pandemic and the changing way in how people are working is further impacting on the mental health of the workforce.

Pre-Covid estimates from Deloitte UK (2020) put the cost to UK employers of poor mental health among employees at £42bn - £45bn each year; made up of absence costs of around £7bn, presenteeism costs between £27bn and £29bn and turnover costs of around £9bn. By investing in appropriate interventions, including workplace counselling, employers can significantly reduce the costs of disruption to their business and the wider economy.

Research has shown that workplace counselling can halve sickness absence in organisations and that have accessible services, provided as part of an EAP programme or in-house, return to work sooner, are more resilient, productive and less likely to become long-term sick.

BACP recommends:

Strengthen Scotland's economic recovery from Covid-19 by supporting employers, employees and vulnerable groups through ensuring universal access to counselling in the workplace.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

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