



School and community counselling services for children and young people in Wales

*Are they working well and how can
they be improved?*



About this report

This report is a summary for young people of **a research study on school and community counselling services in Wales**. These counselling services are there to support young people's mental health and wellbeing, so it is important that young people can read about the research study in a youth-friendly summary. We also hope this report will help to raise young people's awareness of school and community counselling services.

If you want to read our **full research study report**, you can do so [here](#).

If you're **short of time**, you can just read the main messages in the box on the next page.

If you are worried about your mental health and wellbeing or if you just want to find out more about mental health and wellbeing, there are some **sources of support and information** on the page 3.

Throughout the report there are some **links to websites**. These are underlined in the report and if you are reading the report online, you can click on them to take you straight to the website. If you have a paper copy of the report, the website addresses are written out in full on page 19.

If there are any words in this report you don't understand, check out the **Explanation of terms** on page 18.



The report in a page...

- ★ Awareness of counselling services is low and not all young people are sure what counselling is.
- ★ It is good that young people have the option to refer themselves to counselling or ask an adult to make a referral for them. However, there are not many other ways in which young people can make choices about their counselling.
- ★ It is important that young people like and trust their counsellor and that what they say to the counsellor is confidential.
- ★ Stigma can put young people off going to see a counsellor, but support from parents and carers encourages them.
- ★ Counselling services should be available to younger children in primary school.
- ★ A whole range of mental health and wellbeing support should be available to all young people. Counselling services should be part of that support and offered to young people who need them.
- ★ Counselling services should be flexible and offer choices to young people. Services should offer drop-in sessions, different types of counselling, and online or face-to-face counselling sessions.
- ★ The education system should make sure that mental health and wellbeing support is available to young people by training staff, having a positive mental health culture, and encouraging parents and carers, young people, schools and services to work together.
- ★ It is important to try to measure the impact that counselling has on young people's mental health and wellbeing and on their education. It is also important to ask young people about their whole counselling journey, so that services can continually be improved.

Sources of support for your wellbeing

If you would like to talk to someone about your wellbeing there is help available.

Your school will have people who can help you – ask your form teacher or a member of pastoral staff. They will be able to tell you about your school's counselling service. Or you can contact your local authority counselling service yourself. Details of all the services in Wales are available [here](#).

There are helplines and other resources there for you too:

Meic www.meiccymru.org/

Meic is a helpline service for children and young people up to the age of 25 in Wales. It is open 8am to midnight, 7 days a week. You can contact Meic in Welsh or English. Meic is confidential and you don't have to give your name. It is a free service for everyone.

Telephone (free of charge):

0808 80 23456

Text: **84001**

Online chat:

www.meiccymru.org/chat-with-us/

Childline www.childline.org.uk

You can talk to Childline about anything; no problem is too big or too small. You can contact Childline in English 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; they also have counsellors who speak Welsh and you can arrange a time to speak to one of those counsellors. Childline is confidential and you don't have to give your name. It is a free service for everyone.

Telephone (free of charge):

0800 11 11

Online chat:

www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat/

Online information and advice:

www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/

Samaritans Cymru

www.samaritans.org/wales/samaritans-cymru/

You can telephone, email, or write to the Samaritans if you are struggling to cope.

Telephone (free of charge): **116 123**

or Welsh language service

0808 164 0123

Post: Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit

Support for your wellbeing is also available with the Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit, available in Welsh and English on Hwb.

<https://hwb.gov.wales/resources>
Search 'Mental health toolkit'

Introduction

What is counselling?



Counselling is when a young person talks to a person called a **counsellor** about something that is worrying them or a problem that they have. The counsellor helps the young person to understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and helps them find solutions to their problems.

Often, the counsellor and the young person **talk together in private**.

Sometimes the counsellor and the young person might do other things together to help the young person show how they are feeling. This might be art, drama, a computer game, or music.



What the young person says to the counsellor is **confidential**. This means the counsellor will not tell anyone else, unless they think the young person is at risk of being hurt.

Sometimes counselling can be done in a group of young people or with members of a family.

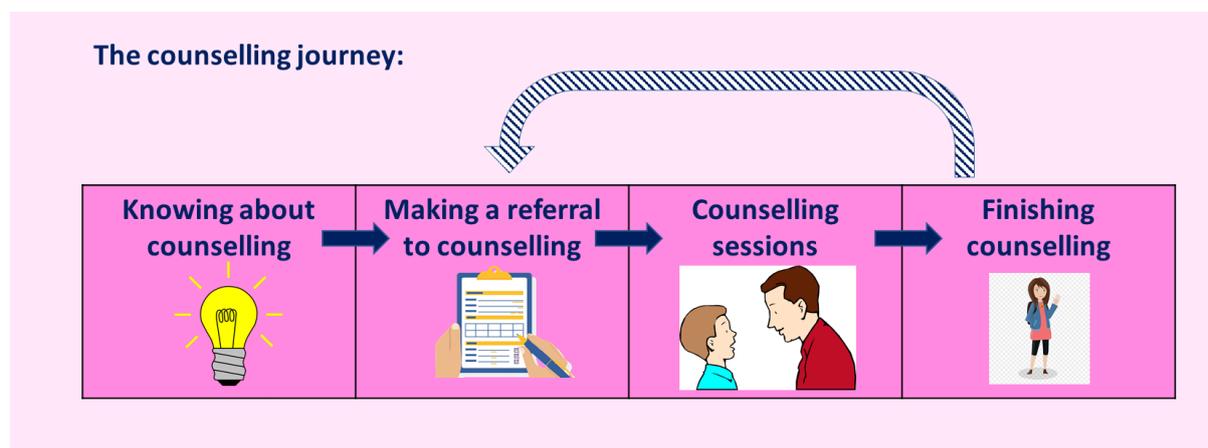
Counselling services for young people in Wales

Every local authority (council) in Wales must, by law, provide a counselling service for the young people in their area. The purpose of this counselling service is to support young people's health, emotional and social needs.

At the very least, the counselling service must:

- Be available to **11 to 18 year olds** and to children in **year 6** at primary school.
- Be available **in secondary schools** and in other places **in the community**.
- Be **independent**. This means that the counselling service and its counsellors are separate to schools, even though counsellors visit schools to give counselling sessions.

Each local authority designs its own counselling service to meet the needs of its young people. This means that services vary quite a lot across Wales and some offer extra things, for example, a service for younger children or special types of counselling. However, all young people who use their local counselling service follow the same counselling journey:



Once a young person finds out about counselling and decides they want to see a counsellor, they can ask to see one or an adult can ask on their behalf; this is called a **referral**. If the counsellor thinks they can help the young person, they will have counselling sessions with them. The number of sessions will vary, depending on the young person's needs. When the sessions finish, the young person can continue to get support from their school. They can also ask for another referral in the future.

About this study

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales is a priority for Welsh Government, so they have given more money to local authorities for their counselling services. They have also said that counselling services should be available to younger children, aged 4 to 10 years old.

In 2021, Welsh Government therefore asked us, researchers at Cardiff University, to investigate the school and community counselling services provided by local authorities in Wales and to make suggestions about how they could be improved.

What did we want to know?

We had four main questions to answer:

Q1. What do people think of local authority counselling services at the moment?

Q2. How could counselling services for 11 to 18 year olds be improved?

Q3. What do people think about a counselling service for younger children and what might this service look like?

Q4. How can we make sure counselling services are always meeting children and young people's needs?



What did we do?

To answer these questions we first looked to see what other studies of counselling services for young people in the UK and Ireland had found out.

Next we spoke to lots of different people about counselling services in Wales, to make sure we heard from children and young people who might use counselling services, people who are involved in running counselling services, and people who are involved in children and young people's wellbeing and education. We interviewed:

- ★ Children and young people, including those with experience of being in care
- ★ School staff, including teachers and pastoral staff
- ★ Counsellors and counselling service managers
- ★ Parents
- ★ Foster carers
- ★ People with senior jobs in health and education

What did we find?

Question 1: What do people think of local authority counselling services at the moment?

Knowing about counselling

The first important thing that we found out was that young people, parents and carers **did not always know** about the counselling service in schools or how they could ask to see a counsellor (make a referral). Also, young people were not always sure about what counselling is and what happens when you see a counsellor.

Awareness of the counselling service in the community was even lower and many young people and others told us they did not know there was a community counselling service. However, people told us that it was **important to have a community service** for young people who do not go to school and for those who might not feel comfortable seeing a counsellor at school.

Getting to see a counsellor

All the counselling services in Wales have lots of ways to make a **referral** (ask for a child or young person to see a counsellor). One way of making a referral is **self-referral**. This means a child or young person goes straight to the counselling service themselves to ask to see a counsellor, rather than a teacher, parent or health worker doing it for them. People thought this was a really important thing to have because it gives young people a **feeling of control** over their wellbeing.

Many people we spoke to said that young people often have to **wait a long time** to see a counsellor. They were worried about this because they thought young people's problems might get worse whilst they waited. School staff told us they were worried because they weren't always sure about the best way to support young people whilst they waited to see a counsellor.



Choice in counselling services

People told us that there **weren't many choices** that young people could make about counselling. For example, there was often no choice about which counsellor a young person could see. They also said that counselling services

weren't very flexible. They used the phrase '**one size fits all**' to describe this and said that counselling services did not change in response to a young person's individual needs.

Another example of choice was **language**. People said language was important because young people might be talking to a counsellor about difficult, emotional things, so they should be able to talk in the language they felt most comfortable in. Some people said, however, that Welsh speaking counsellors were not always available and counselling services did not have counsellors who could speak languages other than Welsh and English.

Things that help and hinder counselling

People told us about the things they think help and hinder counselling services and the things that might encourage or put off young people from using them.

The relationship between a young person and their counsellor was thought to be really important for counselling to make a difference and help the young person with their problem. Young people told us they needed to **like and trust** the counsellor and feel they were being **taken seriously**.

"Someone like you've met before, and someone that you trust and you've spoken to them before... you need to make sure that you can actually speak to them without being worried or scared."

Some counselling services had **drop-in sessions in schools**. These were times when a learner could call in to see the counsellor without needing a referral or making an appointment. School staff thought these were a good idea because learners could **meet the counsellor** before deciding if they wanted to have counselling or ask about self-referral.

It was very important to young people that what they said in counselling was confidential and that they trusted the counsellor not to tell their teachers, parents or carers what they had said. Some school staff said they wanted counsellors to tell them what a young person said in counselling because they wanted to help the learner in between and after their counselling sessions.

Counsellors told us how important it is that counselling takes place in a **quiet, private, relaxing room** and that the same room is available every week. School staff said that they understood this, but it could be **hard to organise in busy schools** with few spare rooms.

People told us was that **counselling services did not always work well with other services** for young people, such as social services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

People thought **stigma** might put young people off seeing a counsellor. They might think that their friends, family or teachers think that having a problem with your wellbeing or mental health is weak or silly, so they say no to counselling because they are **worried about what people will think of them**.

During the pandemic, all the counselling services began to offer **counselling by telephone or online**. People thought that this would suit some children and young people, but not others, particularly younger children. They said that some young people **might feel awkward** and find it difficult to form a bond with the counsellor. They also said that some young people would not have the **right equipment** at home to have online counselling or they might not have **somewhere private** to talk.

School staff told us that it helped counselling when children and young people had **support from their parents or carers** about seeing a counsellor. This was particularly important for children at primary school.

Questions 2 and 3:

A lot of the ideas people had about counselling services for secondary school aged young people and for primary school aged children were the same. Some people even told us that we should not talk about separate counselling services for children and young people – it should be one counselling service for all children and young people. So, we decided to answer questions 2 and 3 together:

How could counselling services for 11 to 18 year olds be improved?

What do people think about a counselling service for younger children and what might this service look like?

First of all, we will answer the question, ***'What do people think about a counselling service for younger children?'***

The people we talked to had different opinions about this. Everybody thought that there should be better mental health and wellbeing support for children in primary schools, but not everybody thought that a counselling service was the best way to do this. Some people thought that it would be better to help children at primary school in other ways. Their ideas included:

- ★ more outdoor lessons
- ★ more wellbeing training for teachers
- ★ more help for children's families.



"I think counsellors are very helpful for people that are ready to get something off their chest, if they're... if it's hard for them to keep it in, then a counsellor is a very good idea."

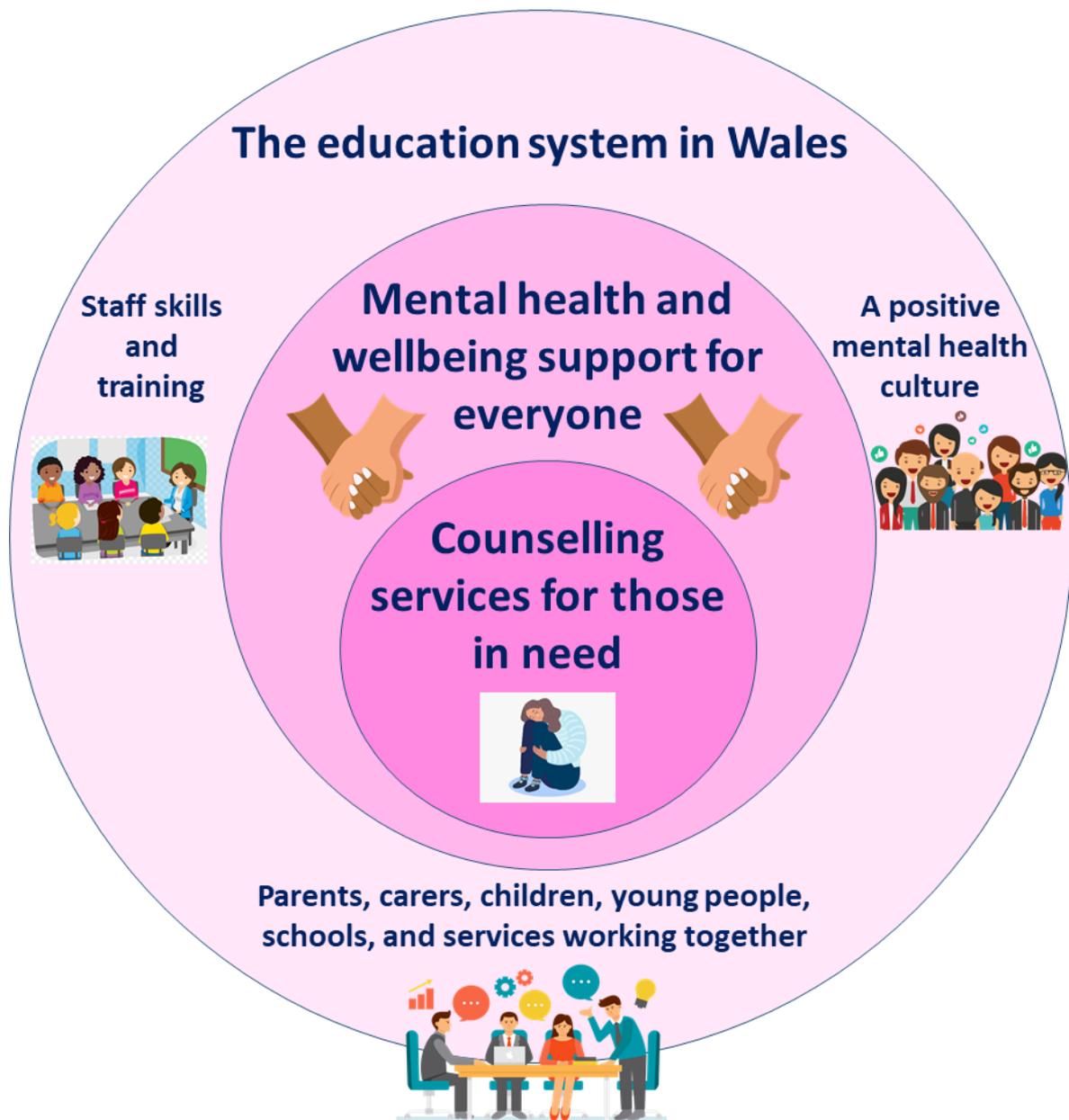
But most people thought a counselling service for younger children was a good idea. They said that younger children would need different types of counselling to older children and young people. For example, counselling that uses play or art.

Next we will answer the other parts of questions 2 and 3 together: ***'How could counselling services for 11 to 18 year olds be improved?'*** and ***'What might a service for children aged 4 to 10 years old look like?'***

We put all the ideas people had about how to improve counselling services into a diagram (page 11). The diagram is for counselling services for children and young people from 4 to 18 years old.

The three circles in the diagram show that counselling services should be part of a range of mental health and wellbeing support that is in place for all young people. In turn, mental health and wellbeing support is an essential part of the education system in Wales.

We will talk about each circle in the diagram in more detail, starting with the middle circle, ***'Mental health and wellbeing support for everyone'***.



The people we talked to said that everyone should be offered mental health and wellbeing support and then young people who need extra help should be offered counselling.

Mental and health and wellbeing support should include:

- ★ A wide range of things that can help young people to have good mental health and wellbeing, whatever their needs are.
- ★ Clear information about all the help that is available, including counselling.

- ★ Information about what counselling is, so children and young people understand what counselling is and how it might help them.
- ★ Support for children and young people before and after they have counselling.

People told us about what will be needed to make sure that mental health and wellbeing support is in place for all young people. This support might be in schools or in other places that children and young people go, like youth centres. These things are shown in the outer circle in the diagram, '**The education system in Wales**'. They are:

Staff skills and training

Adults who work with young people should have training to make sure they know how to support mental health and wellbeing. They should also have training to make sure they understand what counselling is, so that they can explain what it is to young people.



A positive mental health culture

If a place has a positive mental health culture, it means people there will talk openly about mental health and wellbeing and help anyone who is in need. For a place to have a positive mental health culture it needs to have a leader, such as a headteacher, who puts mental health and wellbeing first. The leader will also make sure that there is support for the mental health and wellbeing of the adults who work there.



Parents and carers, children and young people, schools, and services working together

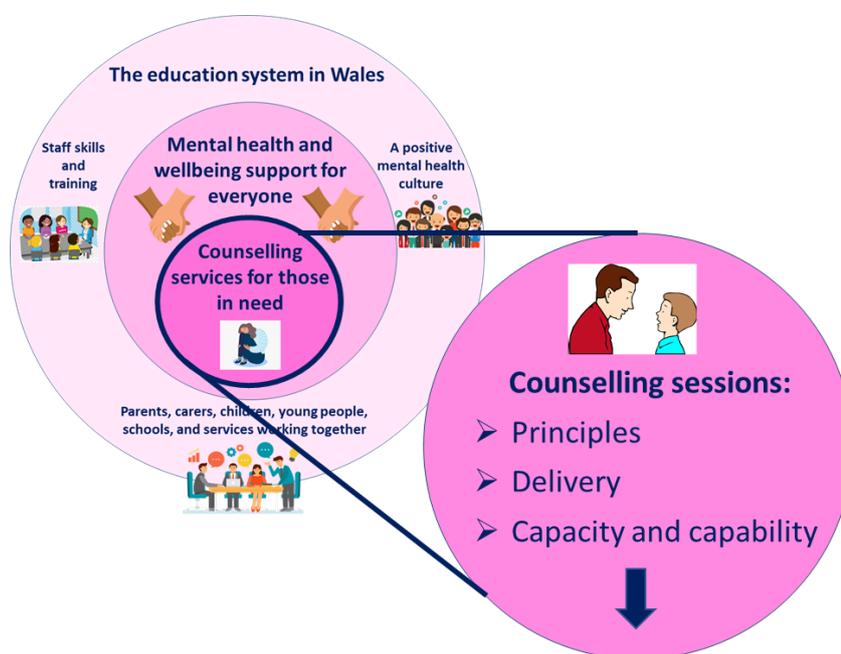
All these people and services need to try to understand each other to help them work better together. Schools, counselling services, and other services should have a child-centred way of sharing information about young people's mental health and wellbeing. This means they should be clear with young people about what information they might need to share and always tell the young person what they are going to share.



All these things are part of the education system in Wales, so we have said that counselling services should be part of a **'whole education system approach to mental health and wellbeing'**. This means that all parts of the education system have a role to play in protecting and improving young people's mental health and wellbeing, and counselling services are an important part of that.

You might be wondering why we have said 'education system' rather than 'school system'. This is because *all* young people should be able to use the counselling services if they need them, but not all young people go to school. Some are in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), in private schools, or educated at home, and might use the community counselling service. It is important that our diagram is for all these young people too.

Counselling services themselves are in the central circle in the diagram (**'Counselling services for those in need'**) and we will now look more closely at what people thought would improve the experience of going to counselling sessions for young people. We grouped these into three main things: principles, delivery, and capacity and capability:



Principles	Delivery	Capacity and capability
A child-centred service offering choice, tailoring and flexibility.	Different ways to make referrals, drop-in sessions, quiet rooms, different types of counselling.	Enough trained counsellors for the number of children and young people who need counselling.

Principles means the ideas that are at the heart of the counselling service and should be thought about in everything the service does. People told us that counselling services should have a '**child-centred**' approach. This means that counselling services should put young people's needs first in everything they do. They said that counselling services should:

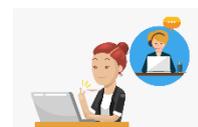
- ★ Give young people **choices**. For example, which counsellor they see and where.
- ★ Be **flexible**, so they can meet young people's individual needs. For example, offer counselling sessions at different times of day and offer as many sessions as a young person needs.

"I think that's very important that they have the choice of whether they want to do it in school or out of school because I just feel it is more control over the situation."

"Probably like lunch because it might be a bit uncomfortable for someone to have to leave in the middle of the lesson to go down, people might be like, 'oh well why is that person leaving?' But break and lunch they can just go and if they don't want to tell anyone, just 'oh I was in the toilet' or something."

Delivery means how counselling services are run and what is offered to young people. People told us that counselling services should:

- ★ Offer different ways to make a referral to counselling, including **self-referral**.
- ★ Offer **drop-in sessions**.
- ★ Offer **different types of counselling**, such as counselling with music or art.
- ★ Take place in **quiet, private rooms** that are suited to counselling.
- ★ Offer counselling **in person, online**, and using **a mixture of both**.



Capacity and Capability is about the counsellors: who they are and how many there are. People told us that:

- ★ Counselling should always be done by **professional counsellors** who have had extra training to work with young people.
- ★ There should be **enough counsellors** for the number of young people who need to see a counsellor.

Question 4: How can we make sure counselling services are always meeting children and young people's needs?

Does counselling help children and young people?

People told us it is important to know if going to counselling sessions **makes a difference** to young people. In other words, we need to know if counselling services are meeting young people's needs, so that we can change them if they are not.

Everyone we talked to thought it was important to try to **measure young people's mental health and wellbeing** when they have counselling, so that we can be sure that counselling services are helping to improve mental health and wellbeing.

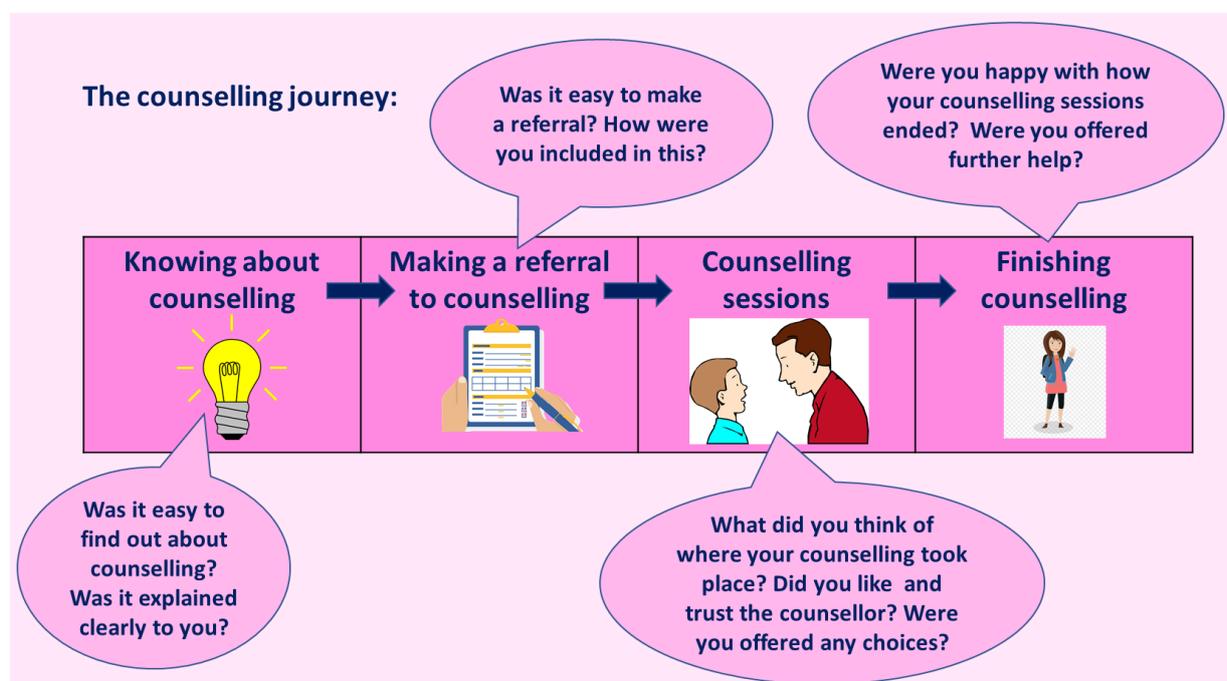
School staff also told us that it was important to measure things to do with young people's time at school, because they thought going to counselling should change this for the better. These were **attendance** (how often young people are going to school), **attainment** (how well young people are doing in their work and exams), and **engagement** (how well young people are joining in and trying hard at school).



What is using the counselling service like?

Another part of meeting young people's needs is making sure that going to counselling is a smooth process that suits them and they do not feel worried about.

People told us it is important to regularly ask young people about their **experiences of their whole counselling journey**, from when they first ask for help, through to having counselling sessions, and finishing their counselling. The diagram below shows the types of questions we might ask young people about their counselling journey.



People told us it is also important to talk to young people who decide they don't want to see a counsellor to make sure we understand why not.

We were also told that it is important to keep records of **how long young people have to wait** to see a counsellor, as waiting a long time can be hard for young people and their families.

Are counselling services working well with schools and other services?

One of the things we found out for Questions 2 and 3 was that counselling services should be one part of the mental health and wellbeing support that is there for young people.

So it is important that we measure how well counselling services are fitting in to the 'bigger picture' of mental health and wellbeing support and if they are working well with schools, parents and carers, children and young people, and other services. This will mean we can make sure all the different parts of the education system in Wales (the diagram on page 11) are working together to meet young people's needs.

What happens next?

Supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing is a priority for Welsh Government and is an important part of a new policy in Wales called the '**whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing**'. You can read about this approach [here](#) if you want to.

Welsh Government will read our report and discuss the suggestions we have made with the organisations it works with on mental health and wellbeing, e.g. Public Health Wales. These discussions will include how the suggestions we have made can be used to make positive changes in the future.

We will also make sure that we tell young people and organisations that work with young people about our report. We will do this through social media, the [School Health Research Network](#) and by contacting organisations directly. You can share this report with anyone you think might be interested in it too.

Explanation of terms

Confidential	If something is confidential it means it is private and will not be shared with people. What a young person says to a counsellor is confidential, unless the counsellor thinks the young person is at risk of harm.
Drop-in sessions	These are times when a learner can call in to see a counsellor without needing a referral or making an appointment.
Education system	This means all the things that come together to make sure children and young people receive an education. It includes schools, colleges, other places where children and young people are taught (e.g. pupil referral units), local authorities, and Welsh Government.
Local authority	This is another way of saying local council. There are 22 local authorities in Wales, e.g. Cardiff, Conwy and Pembrokeshire.
Mental health	There are lots of definitions of mental health. The World Health Organization says it is a state of wellbeing in which a person can use their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, and be productive and able to make a contribution to their community.
Pastoral staff	These are adults at school who are not teachers, but whose job it is to ensure learners are happy and settled at school.
Policy	A policy is a plan that is used as a guide for action.
Referral	A referral is a formal request for help from a service, e.g. when a teacher asks the counselling service if a learner can see a counsellor.
Self-referral	This is when a person makes a request for help from a service themselves, rather than someone else doing it for them.

Stigma	Stigma happens when people think negatively about something other people have or do. Stigma can be attached to illnesses or conditions (e.g. depression), to things that have happened to a person (e.g. going to prison), or to how they live (e.g. in a traveller community).
Tailoring	This means that a service is adapted or changed to meet the needs of a person using the service.
Wellbeing	There are lots of definitions of wellbeing and this is because what gives us a sense of wellbeing can vary from person to person. Definitions of wellbeing often include feeling happy and contented, having energy and desire to do things, feeling you can cope, and having things in your life that have meaning for you and interest you.

Website addresses

Our full research study report	https://gov.wales/review-school-and-community-based-counselling-services
Details of all the local authority counselling services in Wales	https://gov.wales/accessing-school-and-community-based-counselling-coronavirus
Local authorities' duties around counselling services	https://gov.wales/independent-counselling-services-guidance-local-authorities
The 'whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing' policy	https://gov.wales/framework-embedding-whole-school-approach-emotional-and-mental-wellbeing
The School Health Research Network	https://www.shrn.org.uk/

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.