

The Highland Council

Agenda Item	7.
Report No	EDU/16/23

Committee:	Education
Date:	7 September 2023
Report Title:	Counselling in Schools Update
Report By:	Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Counselling is available in all Highland schools for children aged 10+. This service is part of a Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing that covers the continuum from developing positive relationships and a positive culture, through to developing trauma informed practices in our schools and early learning and childcare settings.
- 1.2 For most children, families and staff, prevention and signposting of self-help materials is a sufficient level of support to meet their wellbeing needs. To support children/young people, parents/carers and practitioners, a website has been created to enable a central space for support materials and to provide ease of access for information, resources, and training <https://www.wellbeinghighland.co.uk/>.
- 1.3 However, for some, direct intervention, either from school staff, community-based partners or specialist services is also required, especially where trauma and adversity has impacted on mental health and emotional wellbeing. This report provides an update specifically on the progress of one of these services, Counselling in Schools.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. Note the progress made on embedding a school counselling service across Highland and consider and comment on the data gathered to date in relation to this service.
 - ii. Be aware of counselling as one part of the available supports for promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing across Highland.
 - iii. Note the training available in relation to Promoting Positive Relationships, Mental Health Awareness and Becoming Trauma Informed and signpost this as appropriate to schools and services within your communities.
 - iv. Be aware of and promote the use of the website created for parents/carers, pupils, and practitioners in Highland, to support mental health and wellbeing: <https://www.wellbeinghighland.co.uk/>

3. Implications

3.1 Resource

This Counselling in Schools service has been fully funded by the Scottish Government since 2021, with an annual commitment of £1.022m.

3.2 Legal

- Health and Wellbeing is one of the three main strands of Curriculum for Excellence and as such there is a duty on all Local Authorities in Scotland to address this area of work across the curriculum in all schools.
- The Education (ASL) (Scotland) Act 2004 and 2009 requires the local authority to identify, provide for and review the additional support required by children and young people who have health and wellbeing needs (including mental health needs).
- The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 stresses the importance of everyone involved with a child taking responsibility for their wellbeing, and ensuring they work together to enable the child to reach their full potential.
- The Equality Act 2010 requires all local authorities to support those staff members and school pupils who have disabilities (including mental health difficulties).

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)

It is acknowledged that many children from 'vulnerable' groups are over-represented in those who have mental health difficulties. This includes children, families and staff living in SIMD 1+2, those who identify as LGBTIQ, those with a disability and those who are known to have experienced previous adversity. Tracking the access to counselling for these groups is therefore important.

This service takes a trauma informed approach, as it is known that this can have positive community, poverty, and equality implications by reducing the impact of trauma on those individuals and groups more at risk of experiencing adversity and enabling individuals to be better supported.

In relation to children's rights, an impact assessment has shown that the following articles are of particular note:

- Article 6 – All children have the right of life. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.
- Article 12 All children have the right to express their views and have these taken into account in matters affecting them.
- Article 19 – Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for, and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.
- Article 24 – Children have the right to good quality healthcare and to clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment so that they will stay healthy.
- Article 28 Every child has the right to an education.

3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever

There are no identified implications except that training can be (and is being) delivered remotely at present and is likely to continue as a means of providing continued staff development, which reduces or negates the need to drive to venues in the future.

3.5 Risk

The counselling service directly supports the mental health of children and young people at an early stage, reducing the risk of escalating mental health difficulties.

3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)**

There are no specific health and safety risks. This service aims to support the mental health of children and young people and reduce risk.

3.7 **Gaelic**

There are no specific implications for Gaelic learners. Counselling is available, where appropriate, to all pupils age 10+ in Highland Schools. There are however no designated Gaelic speaking counsellors, and all services are provided through the medium of English.

4. **Background**

4.1 Counselling in Scottish Schools has been available to all pupils from age 10+ since 2021. This has been fully funded by the Scottish Government and has up until now been delivered in Highland by a range of private organisations and 3rd sector services on behalf of Highland Council. This service is delivered equitably across all Council Areas and is overseen by a Counselling Manager, who is part of a local network of support including Highland Council services, NHS Highland Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Private, Voluntary and 3rd Sector Organisations. The Counselling Manager provides a quality assurance role and reports quarterly on the services being provided to senior managers within the Council and to Scottish Government.

4.2 Counselling can be beneficial to many children and young people, however preventative curricular approaches and other early interventions such as programmes to reduce anxiety, social skills teaching and approaches to improving a school's emotional climate can have a greater overall effect (Rickard et al., 2023). These approaches are therefore also part of the Whole School Approach to supporting mental health and wellbeing.

4.3 Counselling is one part of a whole school approach, supported by the range of Highland Council Psychological Services as recommended within the Personal Social Education (PSE) review (Scottish Government, 2019). The PSE review found that:

'There was strong agreement on the importance of school counselling in delivering effective support to young people, however, this is within a wide spectrum of mental HWB support. School counselling should not be seen as the only effective delivery mechanism to support young people; existing approaches already being delivered by schools, such as nurture, should be complemented by a school counselling service.'

5. **Guidance and Governance**

5.1 Expectations of the School Counselling Service are laid out in the Highland Council 'School Counselling Guidance' that is informed by the Scottish Government 'School Counselling in Secondary Schools' document. Evaluation of the contract and collection of data for both local and Scottish Government purposes is completed on an ongoing basis by the Counselling Manager.

5.2 In April 2021 Highland Council entered into a procurement process which allowed 11 service providers to become part of a framework linked to an over-arching contract with the Council through to April 2024. This allowed ALL schools in Highland to receive an equitable service.

5.3 As service providers continue to deliver services in several of our ASGs, ongoing evaluation of their contract with Highland Council has enabled discussion around enhanced consistency of approach to school counselling services across Highland.

6. Service Delivery

6.1 Due to sad and unforeseen circumstances, Highland Council's largest service provider, announced their intention to cease trading in April 2023. In response to this Highland Council speedily advertised and successfully recruited to Counsellor posts to create an in-house service. The speed of recruitment kept the disruption to service as short as possible. Recruitment to some vacancies is still ongoing. However there continues to be service in all ASGs with waiting list monitoring in progress. As all the recruited counsellors had previously worked with the service provider, where possible staffing allocations were made to maintain previously formed relationships and maintain a continuous service.

6.2 An online referral system has been established that supports monitoring of progress of children and young people and enhances communication between school and counsellor. In addition, the system should see the collection of data become more robust and monitoring of any waiting list more accessible. Tracking the access to counselling from those most vulnerable can therefore be more closely monitored.

6.3 In May 2023 the Children and Young People's Commissioner published a report on their investigation into School Counselling Services in Scotland making several recommendations to enhance the service (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2023). Many of the recommendations are already in place in Highland. There was a recommendation however to be more robust in gathering the views of children and young people accessing counselling and so this has been added to the in-house referral system. This system is being trialled and will be adapted in line with feedback from ASGs over coming months.

6.4 The in-house service is managed centrally within Psychological Services and will provide the advantage of allowing enhanced collaboration between professional partners through linked processes and joint training and give the opportunity for further research and development of all aspects of the School Counselling Service. By working closely alongside the PMHW team the in-house service will continue to enhance a targeted and timely intervention to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people across the area.

7 Training

7.1 To support the direct delivery of counselling to pupils, awareness training has also been provided to PSAs and teachers relating to all areas of mental health and wellbeing. This has been delivered by the Counselling Manager, Educational Psychologists and Primary Mental Health Workers. It has targeted areas that children and young people have presented to the counselling service, to support a greater awareness and understanding in schools.

7.2 In 2022 an aim was agreed as an evaluation measure for the training provided. This aim was that 'by June 2023, 85% of school staff (teaching and support staff) who access this training, will report this has had a positive impact on their practice.' The baseline measure from 139 PSAs who had been in the training pilot indicated that 75% of staff at the time reported at least a 2-point increase on a 10-point scale. This training continues to be well received by practitioners and the stretch aim has been exceeded.

87% of participants have reported a positive impact on their practice as a result of the training. Educational psychologists are planning focus group interviews during session 2023-24 to gather more qualitative data to identify the specific impacts on individual practice.

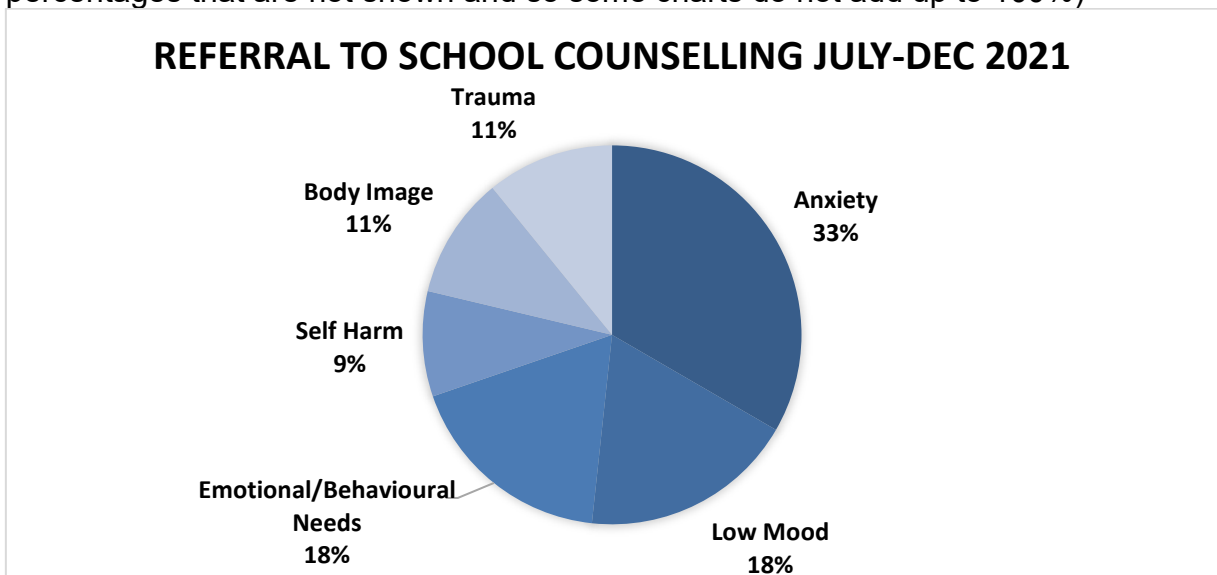
8 School Counselling Data

8.1 In Highland there continues to be a positive uptake of counselling in schools. In large part, sessions are now delivered face-to-face, although on-line sessions are also offered and are preferred by some pupils.

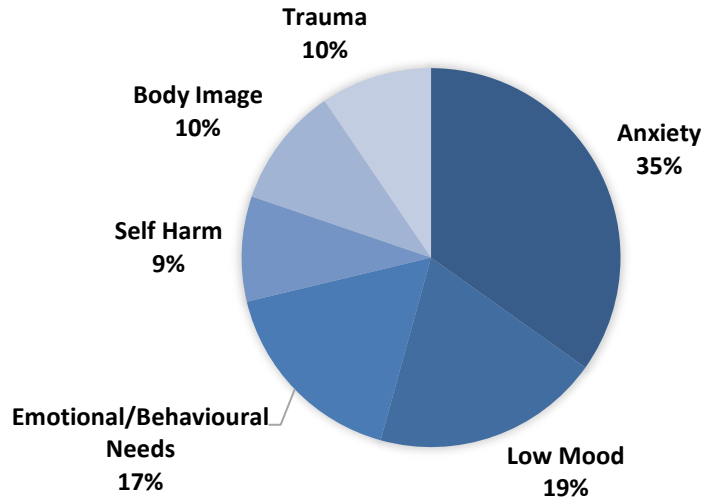
8.2

	Jan-Jun 2021	Jul-Dec 2021	Jan-Jun 2022	Jul-Dec 2022	Jan-Jun 2023
No. of ch/yp accessing counselling	797	702	879	743	767
No. identifying as female	520	442	583	497	517
No. identifying as male	277	220	264	213	207
No. identifying as non-binary/other	Not requested	40	32	33	43
No. of in-person sessions	489	627	746	678	694
No. of on-line sessions	440	459	494	104	207
Number in P6	90	45	74	27	47
Number in P7	91	76	111	75	68
Number in S1	105	102	76	66	85
Number in S2	127	104	139	101	138
Number in S3	119	118	158	134	127
Number in S4	95	102	155	162	146
Number in S5	131	95	91	99	95
Number in S6	39	60	75	79	61

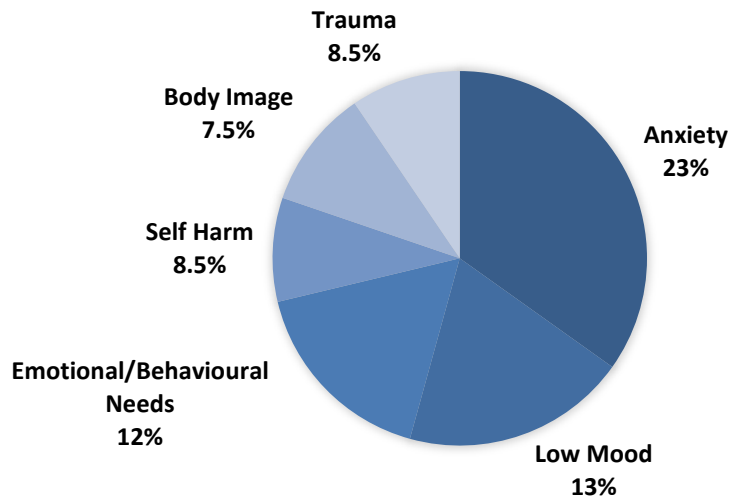
8.3 Across Highland there is consistency in the main reasons for referral to school counselling, which aligns to the reasons for referral to other mental health services and so is not an unusual pattern. The graphs below show the percentage share of the main reasons for referral, with anxiety remaining the main concern for children and young people. These issues have shaped the content of the awareness raising training delivered by specialist services. (n.b. there are other categories with smaller percentages that are not shown and so some charts do not add up to 100%)



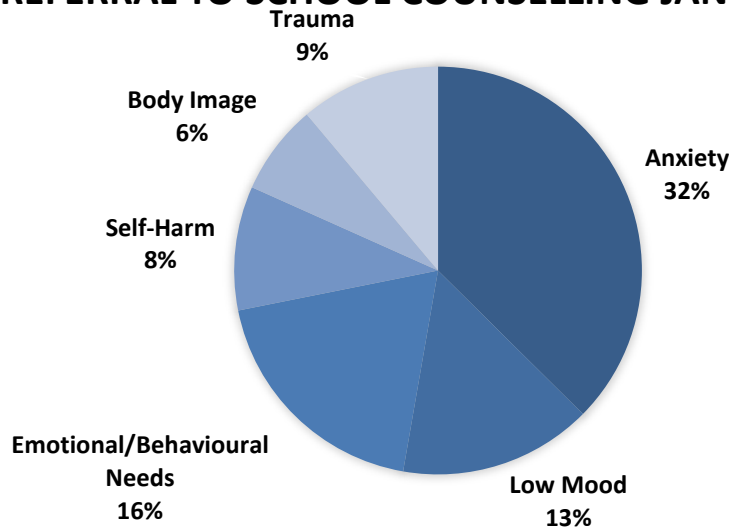
REFERRAL TO SCHOOL COUNSELLING JAN-JUNE 2022



REFERRAL TO SCHOOL COUNSELLING JULY - DEC 2022



REFERRAL TO SCHOOL COUNSELLING JAN-JUNE 2023



- 8.4 Counselling is an early intervention service and generally pupils are seen without delay. A recent snapshot of School Counselling within ASGs demonstrated average waiting lists of 6 young people per ASG, which is considered an acceptable level, given the turnover of pupils entering the service. There is however a requirement for both service providers and in-house counsellors to make initial contact with any pupil referred, within 14 days, to complete an assessment of their needs. This ensures that any pupil with significant needs can be referred on to other services quickly, should they require a more specialist service. For those pupils who have a short wait, guidance support, self-help materials and on-line counselling are also available to them.
- 8.5 NHS Highland have commissioned a fully on-line counselling and support service called [Kooth](#) that can be completely anonymous for young people from 10-18 and has been promoted across Highland schools over the past 12 months. In addition to school support, staff are encouraged to support children and young people to access this service within any waiting period where appropriate.
- 8.6 In this year's Lifestyle Survey, an additional question was added to ask pupils who had received counselling, whether they would recommend it to a friend. Data on counselling from elsewhere indicates that those pupils who use this service, generally agree that it has been a positive experience for them individually and so we asked 'Would you recommend it to a friend' as an evaluation measure. The results provide a baseline for us and a first indication of direct views that have been gathered anonymously from 354 pupils:
- 65.6% of girls who accessed counselling would recommend it to a friend.
 - 70.7% of boys who accessed counselling would recommend it to a friend.

9 General Levels of Wellbeing

- 9.1 In relation to monitoring general levels of wellbeing in the pupil population, as an evaluation of the whole school approach, several measures from the Highland Lifestyle Survey are being used. This survey is undertaken in Highland every 2 years and was completed by pupils in P7, S2 and S4 in April 2023.

We had a very ambitious aim, that by June 2023 there would be a 5% increase in the number of children reporting their wellbeing needs are being met on each wellbeing indicator, however this did not take account of the on-going impact of COVID-19, disruption to education and social interactions and the longer-term impacts for some cohorts, that impacted the mean scores.

S2 pupils were significantly impacted in relation to COVID. They were in P6 as COVID hit and having a disrupted P7 year, transitioned in 2021. They have recorded lower scores for ALL but one of the Wellbeing indicators (Responsible increased by just less than 1%). Some of these scores were significantly down, e.g., 4 percentage points lower for 'included', 6 percentage points lower for 'safe' and 8 percentage points lower for 'Respected'. This has significantly skewed the overall wellbeing scores. Indeed all 3 cohorts feel less 'safe' now, which may be linked with COVID.

Wellbeing Indicator - 'In general, do you feel....'	March 2021	April 2023
Safe	81.51%	77.6%
Healthy	76.81%	77.8%
Active	78.68%	81.1%
Nurtured	74.62%	74.9%
Achieving	66.58%	67.2%
Respected	67.38%	64.1%
Responsible	66.90%	68.3%
Included	72.14%	69.4%

On a positive note, 91% of pupils are aware of the meaning of the term wellbeing and 64% of pupils noted that this was a topic discussed in schools. 85% of pupils reported that they had lessons directly relating to their wellbeing, indicating that this is embedded within the curriculum for most pupils.

- 9.2 As an additional measure, there was an aim that by June 2023, there would be a 2% increase in the number of children reporting their rights were being met on each right reported as part of the Highland Lifestyle Survey. Again, there was progress in all areas, but this was around a 1% gain rather than 2%. Perhaps with all scores already being above 90%, 2% progress was overly ambitious.

Children's Rights – 'Do you feel your rights are being met?'	March 2021 Yes	April 2023 Yes
Your right to education	95.33%	96.1%
Your right to relax and play	90.85%	91.1%
Your right to have a view and have this listened to	90.63%	91.4%
Your right to be safe from violence	92.69%	92.7%
Your right to the best possible health	93.33%	94.7%

The Lifestyle Survey scores indicated that 93% of pupils know that they have rights and 66% noted that rights were discussed in school, with 73% stating they had lessons specifically teaching them about their rights. With the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots Law expected within the next 12 months and the increased focus on pupil participation, further work is ongoing to support all services, agencies, and groups to ensure they gather and listen to the views of all children and that they consider children's rights when designing and delivering service change.

Designation: ECO Education & Learning

Date: 24th July 2023

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Background Papers:

- Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (2023). *Mental Health: Counselling in Schools*. <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/resources/mental-health-counselling-in-schools/>
- Scottish Government (2019). Review of Personal and Social Education: preparing Scotland's children and young people for learning, work and life.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-personal-social-education-preparing-scotlands-children-young-people-learning-work-life/>

- Scottish Government (2020). *Access to Counselling in Secondary Schools* <https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-education-authorities-establishing-access-counselling-secondary-schools/documents/>
- Rickard, N., S., Chin, T-C, Cross, D, Hattie, J. & Vella-Brodrick, D. A. (2023) Effects of a positive education programme on secondary school students' mental health and wellbeing; challenges of the school context, *Oxford Review of Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2023.2211254](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2211254)