

General Election 2024 BACP manifesto

**Mental health matters:
championing
counselling and
psychotherapy**



Contents

Mental health matters: championing counselling and psychotherapy	3
Lead a stronger vision for our nation's mental health	3
Improve access and choice	4
Support services and practitioners	6
Ban conversion therapy	7

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T: 01455 883300 E: bacp@bacp.co.uk www.bacp.co.uk

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Mental health matters: championing counselling and psychotherapy

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) is the leading and largest professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK. Representing 70,000 members working across the UK, we set and maintain high standards of ethical practice. Our members make a vital contribution to improving the nation's mental health, working with people of all ages across the public and private sectors.

The next Government must adopt a wider range of policies that promote mental wellbeing, remove barriers to accessing counselling and psychotherapy, and support the qualified yet underutilised workforce of counsellors, psychotherapists, and therapeutic coaches to make a greater contribution to reversing the mental health crisis.

Our manifesto reflects the urgent need to tackle the growing demand for accessible and early mental health support. Addressing the social determinants of mental ill health - such as poverty, racism and ableism - by tackling systemic inequalities and expanding support for preventable mental health conditions must be a priority.

Lead a stronger vision for our nation's mental health

Our asks:

- **Appoint a Cabinet-level Minister for Mental Health to oversee mental health policy delivery and reform.**
- **Publish a cross-Government 10-Year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan.**

The scrapping of the original 10-Year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan (now set to be integrated into the Major Conditions Strategy) risks eroding support for those less likely to suffer with chronic health issues, but who still require dedicated mental health support – such as children and young people. The next Government must ensure that cross-departmental mental health policy reform is prioritised.

The current lack of a Cabinet-level Mental Health Minister prevents adequate oversight of the mental health policy landscape, and the change needed to ensure the nation receives the mental health support it deserves in such challenging times.

Improve access and choice

Children and young people

Our asks:

- **Deliver universal early help counselling interventions across all England's primary schools, secondary schools, further education colleges and sixth form settings.**
- **Fund a national roll out of early help community hubs for 11 to 25-year-olds across England.**

School-based counselling is a proven intervention for children and young people experiencing psychological distress¹ but is not accessible in all schools and further education (FE) colleges in England. Schools and FE colleges struggle to fund in-house counselling. England is the only UK country without a government-funded national programme for independent post-primary school-based counselling: this must be urgently addressed.

The next Government must ensure that there is a mental health professional in every school, and that this workforce includes counsellors and psychotherapists. Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) need clearer referral routes for children and young people who do not meet the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services' (CAMHS) threshold but still require additional help.² We support the MHST+ model,³ with a funded counselling pathway within the broader MHST framework.

The next Government must also commit to a national roll-out of early help community hubs for 11 to 25-year-olds, providing free counselling in every local area through the YIACS (youth, information, advice, and counselling services) model.⁴ These services should be delivered by trained counsellors and psychotherapists working to a children and young people's competence framework.⁵

NHS Talking Therapies

Our asks:

- **Recruit more trained counsellors and psychotherapists to the NHS to meet workforce expansion targets and increase access to treatment.**
- **Expand and develop recognised training routes and career pathways for counsellors and psychotherapists to enter the NHS workforce.**
- **Expand the range of evidence-based interventions available to all service users, irrespective of their location, and enshrine a choice of therapy in the NHS constitution.**

Successive Government strategies, including the Five Year Forward View⁶ and NHS Long Term Plan⁷ prioritised increasing access to mental health services but failed to address the chronic workforce shortage. Attempts to expand services will fail if there's not a comprehensive workforce plan to address this shortage and ensure professional security and development for the NHS mental health professionals.

Initiatives like the NHS Talking Therapies for Anxiety and Depression programme, (formerly IAPT), have made a positive impact. But these services don't meet the needs of all patients. Less than half of NHS Talking Therapies referrals in the past year moved to recovery.⁸ Research persistently shows that offering a choice of evidence-based psychological therapies and involving service users in care plan design improve patient outcomes.⁹ However, choice of interventions is inconsistent, leading to a postcode lottery for access to suitable therapies.

Workplaces

Our ask:

- **Provide tax incentives to support employer investment in high quality, professional mental health services; including workplace counselling and therapeutic coaching.**

One in five workers took time off due to poor mental health caused by pressure or stress in the past year, risking the UK becoming a 'burnt-out nation'.¹⁰ The economic and social costs of mental ill health in England reached £300 billion in 2022, with the largest burden falling to businesses (total cost of £101bn) due to lost productivity and the costs of absence and presenteeism.¹¹

Workplace counselling can halve sickness absence in organisations,¹² supporting people to return to work sooner, increasing productivity and resilience, and reducing the likelihood of long-term sick leave.

Counselling through Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) can be critical in tackling the sickness absence that is slowing economic growth, and helping to build a stronger, more resilient workforce. More than 1,375 million counselling sessions were delivered by EAPs in the year beginning January 2022.¹³

Support services and practitioners

Third sector counselling services

Our ask:

- **Third sector providers must be given sustainable multi-year contracts, nationally and through local Integrated Care System/Board provision. They must also receive parity of funding and esteem with statutory services with NHS referrals followed by commensurate funding.**

New Philanthropy Capital's February 2024 State of The Sector report estimates that charities supplement state services by £2.4bn annually.¹⁴

Third sector services are often best placed to support marginalised communities underserved by mainstream services. Targeted funding for third sector counselling services could alleviate pressure on statutory services - especially for issues transcending the scope of NHS Talking Therapies for Anxiety and Depression. It could increase access to mental health support for marginalised groups requiring specialist, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed psychological support.

However, many third sector services report increased NHS referrals without corresponding funding. Many of these services risk closure in the current financial climate, which would result in reduced specialism and client choice.¹⁵

VAT on mental health services

Our ask:

- **Remove VAT on counselling and psychotherapy services provided by counsellors and psychotherapists on a Professional Standards Authority Accredited Register.**

Adding VAT to mental health services contradicts legislation on parity of esteem for mental and physical health, highlighting an unfair disparity for the treatment of services delivered by mental health professionals. While psychologists, art therapists and drama therapists - who the Government chooses to regulate by statute - offer VAT exempt services, counsellors and psychotherapists cannot.

This additional cost, especially during challenging financial times, significantly hinders vulnerable people from accessing essential mental health support. These barriers must be removed.

Ban conversion therapy

Our ask:

- **Bring forward legislation that protects everyone who is at risk of harm from conversion therapy. Any ban must be inclusive, effective, and workable and should not lead to unintended consequences around therapists' ability to work with gender and sexually diverse clients.**

We oppose the misuse of counselling or psychotherapy to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identification. This practice is ineffective, harmful, and contradicts evidence-based, client-centred ethics. No sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently superior or more natural than another. Everyone should access therapeutic help without fear of judgement or pressure to change who they are.

Extensive research supports the need for a ban on conversion therapy. The Conservative Government's LGBT action plan, including a survey of 108,000 respondents, found that 2% had undergone conversion therapy and 5% had been offered it.¹⁶ It's essential the next Government puts the appropriate legislation in place to protect vulnerable people of all ages.

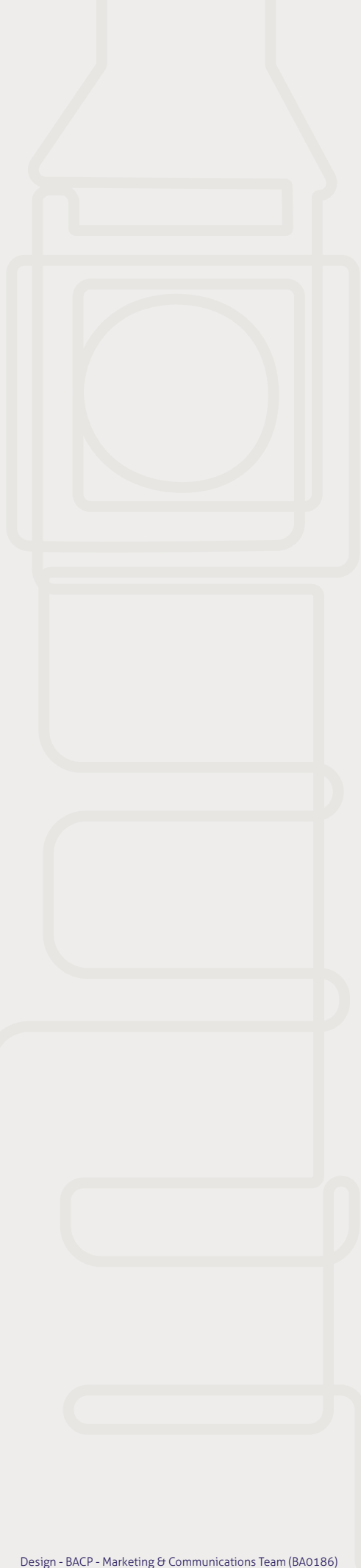
For further information contact:

Martin Bell, BACP's Head of Policy & Public Affairs

publicaffairs@bacp.co.uk

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- ³ Barnardo's. (2023). It's hard to talk: Expanding Mental Health Support Teams in education. Available at: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/its-hard-talk-expanding-mental-health-support-teams-education> (Accessed: 1 May 2024).
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- ⁷ NHS. (2019). *The NHS Long Term Plan*. Available at: <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/nhs-long-term-plan-version-1.2.pdf> (Accessed: 23.05.24).
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- ¹³ Employee Assistance Professionals Association. (2023). *Holding it Together: UK Mental Wellbeing and the Role of Employee Assistance Programmes*. Available at: <https://www.eapa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EAPA-Holding-It-Together-report-2023.pdf> (Accessed: 23.05.24).
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**British Association for
Counselling and Psychotherapy**

15 St John's Business Park
Lutterworth, Leicestershire,
LE17 4HB

bacp@bacp.co.uk
Call 01455 883300

www.bacp.co.uk

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