

Introduction

UNISON is Scotland's largest union with members working in a range of roles in schools, social work and health services. We are able to collate members' work experiences in order to contribute to improved policy making. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee regarding counsellors in schools.

Response

UNISON welcomes the recognition that children and young people require support for their mental wellbeing. We are concerned that the government is too focused on being seen to do something quickly rather than investing in the range of services that would actually make a difference. Supporting pupils' mental wellbeing requires a much more rounded approach with investment in, and co-ordination of, a range of programmes and staff across services to support both pupils and their families. Counselling for a pupil in isolation from their family and wider services will, at best, have a limited impact.

Our survey of members¹ in schools highlights the lack of training and support for staff who are supposed to provide support for pupils with additional support needs as well as basic shortages of staff. Our more recent survey of social work staff² also outlines the impact of cuts on social work teams. These cuts are creating difficulties in schools. Lack of resources means long waits to access proper assessment of pupils' challenges and then further waits to access the right support, both in school and from wider services, once an assessment has been made. Improving resources for school, educational psychology, and social work staff would have a substantial impact on pupils' wellbeing. We are not convinced that a counsellor will be effective without investment in wider services.

In response to a request for comments, our members have indicated that they are well aware of an increase in children and young people experiencing poor mental health. One of the major causes of this is cuts to services and austerity. The impact of austerity is not just felt by adults but by children and young people who experience the stress and worry caused by families being short of money. Members report that an increasing number of families are experiencing periods of destitution. The stress of this situation can be traumatic for young people. Some services that were protective factors to children's wellbeing like school clubs, school sports clubs, school support staff, libraries and librarians, and youth clubs have been cut or reduced just when they were most needed to protect pupils.

Members also have concerns about how counselling is currently being delivered in schools. Counselling is an adult model that needs careful adjustments to meet the needs of young people in school. When adults attend counselling they often plan the timing carefully to have a coffee, meet a friend after or just have some time to reflect. They don't head back to double maths to be asked by a teacher: "*Where have you been and why are you late?*". Adults will have a choice whether they want to go to counselling and

¹ Hard Lessons <https://unison-scotland.org/hard-lessons-support-staff-struggling-to-maintain-standards-for-pupils-because-of-cuts/>

² Save from Harm <https://unison-scotland.org/save-from-harm/>

can choose to go when the time is right for them and also find the right counsellor for them. Children in schools are often told that they are being 'sent to counselling' with no choice of counsellor. Some counselling services in schools offer a time-limited intervention, often as little as 6 weeks. In that time young people are often only beginning to develop a working relationship with the counsellor.

While children who are experiencing stress, anxiety, low mood and self harming behaviour require a therapeutic, relationship-based approach they almost always require practical support, assistance and guidance to support them in managing their difficulties. They require a coordinated and understanding response from the team round the child, as do their parents and carers.

While psychotherapy can help children and young people deal with past difficulties and in suggesting strategies that support helpful coping strategies, it cannot change or make any impact on aspects of the child's environment that need changed e.g. support to parents and parenting, improving housing and financial pressures on families, helping non-abusing parents protect children from the harm of domestic abuse and gender based violence. Nor does it support children's school environment by helping teaching and school staff understand and meet children's needs or support peer networks. Individual counselling puts the responsibility on the child to resolve their problems.

Counselling services, with their model of client confidentiality and very limited joint-working, do not support and inform the coordinated services that young people require. Services that offer pupil and family support are more effective when working with young people with these difficulties.

In our members' experience, school-based counselling services often raise issues that young people need a chance to reflect on in-between counselling sessions. School support staff have to provide this support as counsellors have limited availability. To date they have limited training to enable them to deal with the behaviours that many pupils display.

There remain many questions about this proposal.

Are there suitable qualified people available to take on the counselling roles? Will counsellors be directly employed by the local authority or schools or will it be a service procured from the private or third sector? Will it be a service provided via the local health board like school nurses? If it's a procurement process who is responsible for management and monitoring of the service? The head teacher? The local authority? If counsellors are put in place how will schools assess whether counselling is the appropriate support for a pupil? What training and information will be given to staff who are doing the day-to-day work with pupils undergoing counselling to enable them to support the pupil during the process? What training will be provided for counsellors and who will provide the training? Who is responsible for professional supervision and support for school counsellors?

Conclusion

UNISON believes that this proposal will have a limited impact. We agree that something must be done but we are not convinced that this is the most effective route. A model where therapeutic individual and family support, with a speciality and focus in supporting mental health, would more effectively help children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties than a school based counselling service.

UNISON Scotland

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**Mike Kirby, Scottish Secretary
UNISON Scotland,
UNISON House,
14, West Campbell Street,
Glasgow
G2 6RX**

For further information contact:
Kay Sillars: k.sillars@unison.co.uk
0141 342 2819