

**Children and young people's views of counselling:
improving the tools to gather outcomes**



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1. Introduction

This report draws together the findings of a brief review of the literature about what children and young people say they find useful and value from counselling services and the findings of two workshops held in February and March 2014 with counsellors and managers from a range of youth counselling services.

These workshops explored how outcomes are currently monitored and counsellor perceptions of how well outcomes tools truly capture what young people say about how counselling helps them; they also considered how the different theoretical approaches inherent in counselling training influence practice, which in turn, may have an important influence on the sorts of outcomes counsellors are hoping to achieve for the young people they work with.

Information for the brief review of the literature was compiled from the following:

- Online searches for literature about children and young people's views of counselling provision which identified a small number of published studies on this topic, often with a focus on understanding the barriers to children and young people accessing counselling support.
- The feedback from children and young people sent from 12 youth counselling services in England in response to a call for information disseminated across Youth Access members.
- A number of counselling services' annual reports and service evaluations which included service user feedback.
- Various reports exploring school-based counselling including a scoping report prepared for Counselling MindEd/BACP by Gillian Griffiths (2013), a report by Barnardo's in Northern Ireland about Time 4 Me counselling provision in primary schools and an evaluation of school-based counselling in Wales.

The review is divided into three main sections: the first concerns counselling services in the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and presents the views of young people largely from the 14-25 age group; the second considers the growing area of online counselling provision, where again most of the views are from young people aged between 14-25; the third, which looks at school-based counselling, is largely based on the views of younger children, i.e. aged 12 and under.

In each section, there is a brief summary of the main things that children and young people have said they value about counselling – how it helped them and why. Some of these comments refer to the counsellor they saw, some to the style of service delivery, (e.g. flexibility of appointments) which is a quite distinct aspect of understanding why children and young people engage with this form of support. There is also discussion of the less helpful aspects of counselling provision identified by children and young people and their suggestions for how counselling can be improved. Some feedback about what

young people said they thought would have happened if they had not received counselling, and about the outcomes they felt they had achieved as a result of counselling, are also provided. Throughout anonymised quotes are used to illustrate the points identified.

The material gathered in the two workshops adds to the themes identified in the brief review and summarises:

- What staff in counselling services think young people value about counselling and what it brings them
- What outcomes tools they currently use
- The limitations they identify with current tools and suggestions for improvements
- To what extent and in what ways their theoretical training influences their everyday practice.

2. Voluntary and community sector (VCS) counselling provision

The comments made by young people about their experience of face-to-face counselling delivered via VCS services, including counselling offered within Youth Information, Advice, Counselling and Support Services (YIACS) were overwhelmingly positive about how counselling had helped them. There were some recurring themes in this material which centred on:

- Young people feeling listened to, welcomed, accepted and not judged
- Counselling providing a 'safe space' (and privacy and confidentiality)
- Counselling offering a time and place for young people to raise any issues of concern to them
- Counsellors seeming truly interested in the young person and thereby making it easy to talk
- The pace of support offered, including being able to return on a number of occasions for follow-up support if required
- Opportunities to explore thoughts and feelings, to try out ideas for how to deal with difficulties in a calm and relaxed atmosphere.

2.1 Feeling listened to, accepted and not judged

The following selection of quotes, drawn from across the counselling services who sent in feedback and/or their annual reports and service evaluations, provide a good illustration of how young people find this aspect of counselling helpful:

Friendly, confidential, very helpful, it's good to have someone who is very impartial to speak to...

Non-judgemental, comfortable, accepting, friendly

A friendly, helpful and welcoming place that is completely confidential – the staff make you feel at ease and do all they can to help. I think the location helps with confidentiality too, as it is on a quieter street, not among all the main shops.

A place to get away from problems. A time to reflect and a chance to work through issues

Being able to talk honestly to someone without fear of being judged

Knowing I can say anything and no one will judge me and they will do everything they can to help

There was someone to listen to me and to understand

It's nice to talk to someone you aren't too emotionally attached to... you know they won't judge you and there's nothing to lose in terms of a relationship

2.2 Counselling providing a 'safe space': impartiality, confidentiality and privacy

This was a prominent theme in much of the feedback and it would appear that this feeling of a 'safe space' that is just for them, is an important influence on why young people engage with counselling as a source of emotional support. In particular, a number of young people talked about the value they attached to being able to talk to someone outside of their family or friends who could provide an impartial and independent viewpoint and who did not have any preconceptions about who they were or the issues they were seeking help with.

Although not explicitly mentioned, being able to self-refer themselves for counselling support and for this to be kept confidential (unless not appropriate to do because of concerns about risk), are also likely to be important factors in why many young people highlight the value of counselling as a 'safe space' that is just for them:

The chance to speak about issues and situations which are stressing me out... I can't talk to my friends or family about the things on my mind and this gives me an outlet for the things I would otherwise keep inside

Someone to talk to other than family and friends

Knowing that what is said in the room stays in the room

Nice to talk to someone that you know will not talk about what you've said

It gives me a chance to open up, discuss my feelings without someone adding their own opinion

It felt like I had a 'safe base' for a while which stopped me doing negative things

It was good to get everything off my chest without upsetting anyone – not sure if this is a good or a bad thing but I liked that I didn't have to hold back...

(The service was based in) an easily approachable place by the centre of town that's surprisingly big with rooms that can be considered private for a true and honest chat

2.3 Offering time to raise any issues of concern to them

Although a number of young people talked about finding it difficult to raise some issues, especially if they didn't know the counsellor, or were worried that they might be judged or upset the counsellor, most of the feedback comments reviewed for this report suggest that a key aspect of counselling ses-

sions that young people report as helpful is their sense that they can raise any issues of concern to them, irrespective of how big or small, serious or otherwise, these issues were:

Just about me, I don't have to do anything or be anything but what I am is alright

The willingness to listen even though my problems didn't seem very big...

Being able to come, say whatever is needed, talk it through and leave feeling that a weight has been taken off...

I was able to talk about everything I needed to and was glad to have someone to help me get to where I needed to get to... let me get out the thoughts that were trapped inside...

2.4 Counsellors seem personally interested in the young person

Young people's feedback highlights the importance of friendly and approachable staff and their comments suggest that many counsellors are particularly good at providing this response, thereby engaging young people in the therapeutic counselling relationship. Some comments also allude to the success of community-based counselling provision in particular providing this welcoming environment:

My counsellor is really understanding.... When I think aloud it gives me a chance to work out the things I do and why I feel like I do

They have always shown a great understanding and interest and helped me to start growing within myself

My counsellor took me seriously

(My counsellor) was very supportive towards me, offering compassion and helpful comments at the time they were needed... the rest of the time she was a good listener allowing me to say what I needed to let out again....

It was personal and he seemed actually interested, not like school counsellors or anything...

Asking about your situation – they remember. Makes you feel listened to and important...

Advice that was helpful and showed understanding...

I feel like someone wants to listen to me and actually carers... it's unjudgmental and even insignificant things can be talked about....

I used to feel unhappy but when I told my feelings to a different person it really helped... it's like this is someone who understands me before I was unhappy...

2.5 The pace of support

Various reports detailing the pressures facing voluntary and community sector counselling services have noted that in order to manage demand, or to address financial constraints, an increasing number of services now offer counselling on a time-limited basis and or reducing the length of interventions.

The findings from this review of children and young people's feedback about their experience and views of what is good about counselling support, highlights the value many attach to the flexibility of provision and of counselling being delivered at a pace that gives young people time to reflect and to raise issues in a gradual, non-pressured way. This is important to bear in mind when thinking about how the sector may continue to develop and adapt to the challenges it faces, including how services position themselves for commissioning by CCGs:

It gives me time to think, to sort things out in my head; there's no pressure, no one screaming at me to be politically correct

Everyone was really welcoming. The treatment/care was flexible for when I could make it. All the staff were friendly. It was a private and confidential setting and feeling

Made me feel comfortable and not pressured to say anything I didn't want to

Gave me the time to step back and put things in perspective

(The counsellor) never pushes me to talk about anything... it's my time to talk about what I want, no matter what...

2.6 Opportunities to explore feelings and try out different ways to deal with difficulties

A wealth of feedback comments noted that the opportunities counselling offers to explore feelings and to try out different ways of dealing with difficulties is highly valued by young people. Although on the other hand some young people complained about the non-directional nature of counselling, overall it seems that young people appreciate the chance to develop ways of thinking differently about the issues or concerns facing them:

It offered different methods and solutions to deal with my problems

They helped me properly focus on my problems, and the techniques such as visualising problems as objects helped me keep them in my mind in order to work through them.... even just the act of talking to someone about my problems made them easier

Writing things down.... Thinking about different ways to deal with issues... linking where problems come from initially and subconsciously how I'm trying to fix it

Gives a different view on problems and to think about things differently

To spend time on creative outlets to try and alleviate tensions and build up to the point where I can show people what I'm made of even if they don't know just how much I've come through

Now I sometimes feel down and lost but my acceptance of it is completely different. I can accept in and understand it can and will pass. I can look at my problems as if from a birds-eye view.

¹ Stretched to the Limit Youth Access 2012

2.7 The outcomes of counselling: young people's perspectives

A prominent theme running through the comments made by young people was that counselling had boosted their confidence and made them feel more positive about being able to overcome any difficulties and assertive in expressing their needs. Some talked of feeling “mentally stronger”, of feeling more safe emotionally and of being able to see things from a different perspective. Helping young people to understand and acknowledge their feelings, rather than pushing them aside, was also frequently mentioned as a helpful and positive outcome of counselling:

Even though counselling didn't make all my problems go away, it helped me deal with them better

My way of thinking has changed dramatically

It was very helpful, supportive and informative and I wouldn't have recovered if I hadn't come here (to counselling)

They helped me deal with anger and gave me time to deal with the issues that caused it

Made me a lot more confident and a lot less scared of things

I'm much calmer and positive. I feel I have the confidence to be honest with myself and others. Overall, I am a much more happy person and confident enough to deal with issues when they arise

(Counselling has).... taught me ways of putting things into perspective and rationalising my thoughts.... rather than getting bogged down with negative, stressful thoughts....

My confidence has grown in myself, I have seen the positives in life and I have learnt that I have self-worth

I've found that it's helped to ground me and help me realise I don't have to keep everything bottled up

It helped me believe in myself, I received useful information and it helped me understand that some of my issues were not my fault.

(As a result of counselling...) a lot calmer and don't get angry. Helped family things improve.

I was very confused about everything when I first started. I have become stronger, more focused and calmer

I've learnt to be more gentle with myself, allow myself to be honest and trust myself. I've learnt it's okay to allow myself to feel down.

2.8 What would have happened without counselling?

One counselling service annual report detailed some of the feedback they had received from young people about what they thought would have happened if they had not received counselling. Comments included:

I wouldn't be in education because I would always be excluded or bunking off

If I hadn't had it, I would have ended up hurting myself or someone else

In the opinion of some young people, counselling had actually saved their lives by supporting through periods when they felt suicidal or were engaging in high levels of self-harm or destructive behaviour:

Before I started coming, I would self-harm or attempt suicide sometimes twice a week... now I've had counselling, self-harming is a very rare event...

I wouldn't be alive I don't think. I was on self-destruct, out of control, drinking heavily and taking drugs.

2.9 Less helpful aspects of face-to-face counselling (in the VCS)

Feedback from some young people indicates that they had not found counselling helpful either because they had not got on with their counsellor, or they felt that their counsellor had been “too gentle” and had not challenged them sufficiently, or they had felt unable to talk about the issues concerning them and so had not made any progress in addressing these. Some described counselling as making their feelings seem worse or more difficult to manage and others reported that they had found counselling unhelpful because the counsellor had not given them directions or feedback, or had not recommended specific actions for them to follow.

I needed the counsellor to talk more because I didn't feel they helped me because I was just talking... I wanted someone to direct me in what to do....

I would have liked more feedback or solutions for dealing with my anger

Other unhelpful aspects identified by young people included:

- Long wait times – various comments about waiting too long which could be very stressful and difficult (with several young people reporting that the problem they needed help with had been resolved by the time of the first appointment)
- The length of sessions – some felt they were too short, however, some felt they were too long
- Need for more/greater number of sessions
- Sessions needed to be “more to the point”

- Can be hard to talk about something, possibly to be upset and/or crying and then to have to stop and wait maybe a week for another session
- Dark and small rooms including waiting areas
- Need for different techniques
- Not having information/leaflets to take away

2.10 Findings from a consultation with young people using Youth Information, Advice, Counselling and Support Services (YIACS), Workforce Strategy Partners Programme 2008

In 2007/2008, Youth Access consulted with 23 young people from 5 youth counselling services located in different areas of England as to their experiences of using counselling services.

These young people identified the following benefits of counselling:

- It is a process that helps people grow and gain confidence
- It helps people develop problem-solving skills and understand things differently
- It helps with the practical things in life, e.g. like going to college
- It prevents over-reliance on family and friends.

These consultees reported that they liked having:

- A choice of times when they could see a counsellor and a choice of counsellor
- Clear information about what would happen and about confidentiality
- An informal initial assessment and regular reviews
- An open-ended number of sessions and a generally flexible approach

They all reported positive experiences of the counselling they had received and identified that they had benefitted from:

- Counsellors who worked at their pace and let them stay in control
- Counsellors who were uncritical, helped them work things out for themselves and were responsive
- Continuity of counsellor and the one-to-one individualised support offered from this form of intervention (which they compared favourably to other support services they or their friends had tried).

3. Online counselling: what young people value

The provision of counselling for children and young people delivered online is a relatively new but growing area.² Much of the feedback from young people concerning their use of online counselling echoes the prominent themes identified in the feedback given of face-to-face counselling services. However, a few differences with regard to what young people value about counselling delivered online are apparent and are outlined below.

3.1 Similarities

Feedback from young people using KOOTH, an online counselling provision offered by Xenzone was often quite similar to the feedback from young people accessing face-to-face support, for example, young people talked of appreciating the sense of the counsellor being someone who listened to them, who was 'on their side', who did not judge them and who was understanding and patient with them. There were also comments that through counselling, young people had come to realise that they were not the only one with a problem (e.g. feeling depressed), that many young people felt like this too.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me so often, for letting me come back again and again and not giving up on me.... You gave me the strength to keep going, talking helped me realise a lot of things and helped me move forward...

3.2 Differences/distinctive benefits of online counselling

Some of the possible benefits young people identify from accessing counselling online include the increased accessibility of a service that operates without the need to travel somewhere (thereby providing access for those living some distance away from a counselling service or in an area of the country with limited public transport) and also the more extended hours the service may be available including overnight:

It's great, I feel I have a place that is easily accessible to me for a chat whenever I feel the need to talk

However, it is not just improved accessibility that is valued, some young people identified advantages in communicating their thoughts and feelings via a different medium:

Face-to-face counselling never helped and made it worse. I'm not shy talking to people over the internet and it (online counselling) helps a lot.

I love typing out all my worries and feelings; it gives me a chance to reflect on them and to look at them properly.

² Street, C. (2013) *Online Counselling Provision for Children, Young People and Young Adults* BACP/Counselling MindEd

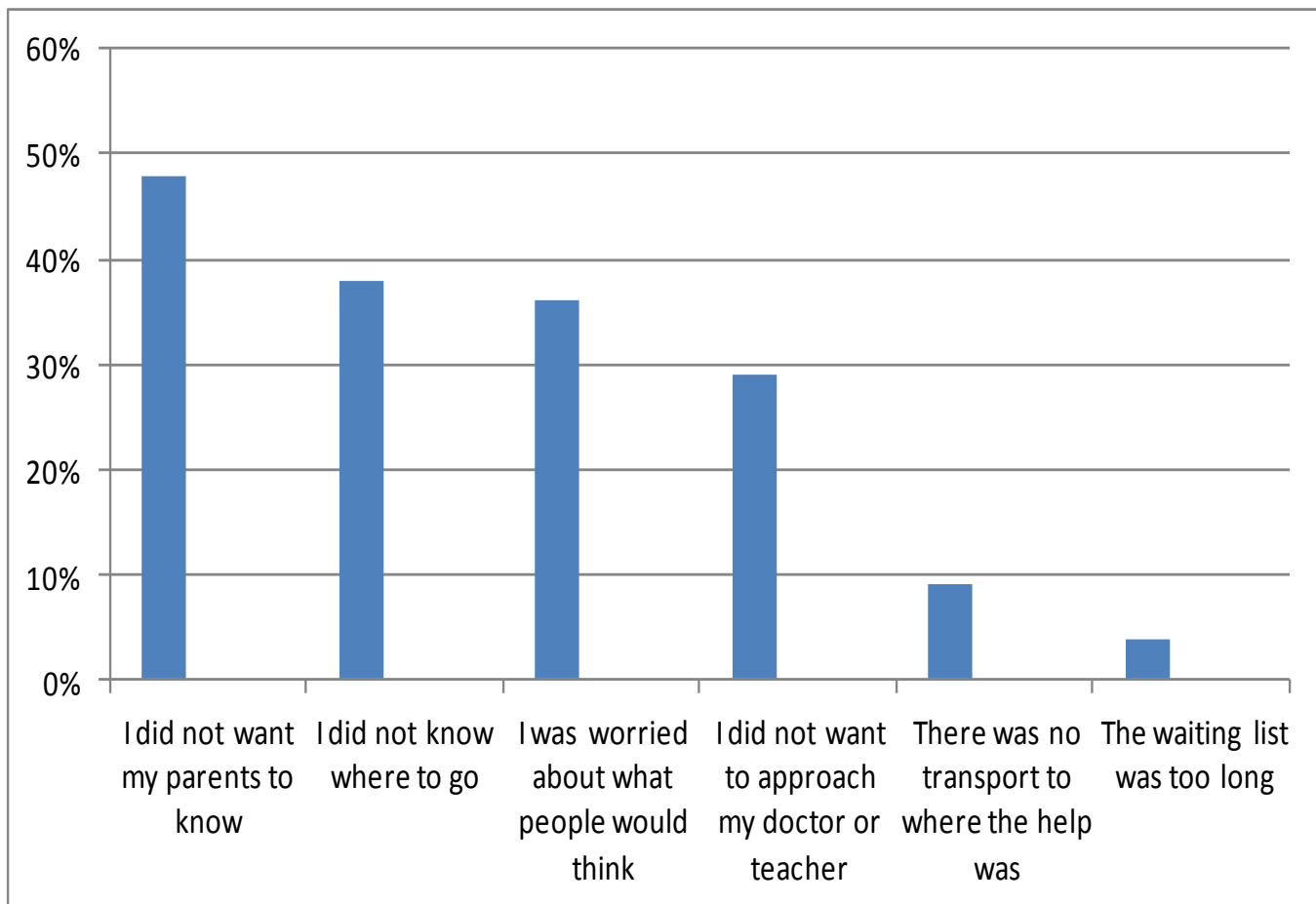
4. School-based counselling provision

Two schools-based counselling services provided evaluations and feedback from young people about the service provided. A further provider of counselling provision offered the findings of some research in their area about the barriers young people identify in accessing counselling support, including analysis of the factors that influence in which setting young people would like to receive counselling.

Key findings from the literature review meta-analysis of helpful factors presented in the scoping report by Gillian Griffith to inform the development of Counselling Minded are summarised in this section which concludes with data from a large survey of school-based counselling and some evaluation findings from a project supported by Barnardos' Northern Ireland, the Time 4 Me project which offers school based counselling and support.

4.1 Factors influencing young people's different counselling opportunities, including schools-based provision: findings from research by Signpost Counselling Service in Hertfordshire (CHeCC)

The following data are based on 764 questionnaires completed by young people in school settings.



³ Gillian Griffiths (2013) *Helpful and unhelpful factors in school-based counselling: clients' perspectives*. BACP/ Counselling MindEd

The study identifies a number of barriers identified by young people including:

- **Resistance:** e.g.. “don’t want to talk about it”
- **Resilience:** “I thought I could solve problems myself”
- **School unresponsive:** “Nothing happened until I complained”
- **Reservations:** e.g.. “I wouldn’t trust anyone” and “I was worried that the problem was not important”
- **Fear:** “I was scared of what might happen”
- **Other:** “dad didn’t want me to go”

Information from the completed questionnaires also indicates quite a wide range of settings where young people would prefer to access counselling, with these including: school, the GP surgery, a community counselling centre, a youth club or similar. Of importance, however, was that a significant number of young people did not answer this question or provided more personal reasons such as preferring to rely on family, or friends or themselves for addressing any problems. Furthermore, the report notes the following:

Analysis by age shows two noticeable shifts. Firstly, the number of young people having their own coping mechanisms and willing to access help through youth clubs and centres grows and the number of young people preferring to access counselling in a school setting drops, as they get older.⁴

The study identifies four key factors that influence young peoples’ choices of how they access counselling support or not:

- **Familiarity** - whether the provision is known, feels comfortable and is convenient to access
- **Trust** – whether the provision is viewed as trustworthy
- **Privacy** - is this provided, is the service confidential
- **Specialism** – how specialist or professional is the service?

It explains that these provide a clear explanation for the differences in young people’s views as to where they would prefer to access counselling, noting that:

While a lot of young people are comfortable at school and trust teachers, other young people seem fearful of the loss of their privacy and confidentiality in a large institution.

⁴ This finding is interesting in that other research and data held by Youth Access has identified that young people tend not to seek counselling in settings that also offer leisure type activities – that they do not want to mix leisure with ‘problems’ and are also concerned about confidentiality in these more generic youth settings. 12

Schools-based counselling

Examples of these influences are provided via the comments of young people when explaining their preferences, for example, illustrating the influence of familiarity:

I know a lot of people in the school. So I would feel more comfortable speaking to someone at school

I know people and feel safe at school

Illustrating the influence of children and young people trusting (or not trusting) professionals:

I know a lot of people who have been to the school counsellor and it worked

I don't trust my teachers. They won't judge you at the youth centre

Illustrating concerns about privacy and confidentiality:

In school people spread rumours and you can't get any privacy

Community centre wouldn't know you so you could be more confidential

Influence of thinking that services are specialist:

Doctors are very reliable and professional. They are also private as well

I would go to a community counselling centre because they know what to do and are experienced.

One of the conclusions of the study is that because of these different concerns and influences on children and young people's preferences for where they would like to access counselling, it is important that both school-based and out-of-school services should be available.

4.2 Other research about barriers to school-based counselling and helpful and unhelpful factors from children and young people's perspectives

A 2007 report by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)⁵ provides information about children and young people's views on counselling. Most agreed that there was a need for counselling in schools, that this would be beneficial because, for example:

A lot of people might have problems, it could affect your school work and you can let everything out (with counselling)

They also suggested that young people can get depressed and that counselling would help because

Instead of talking to a teacher, it is easier to talk to someone you can trust. If you are upset, they

⁵ BACP (2007) *Counselling in Schools: A research study into services for children and young people for the Welsh Government Office*

aren't going to tell anyone.

The young people consulted also suggested that counselling can make people more confident and that in terms of who should be the counsellor in their school, most thought that it should not be a teacher but rather, should be someone independent in order to provide that degree of distance and privacy from their everyday time in school:

Would be awkward in lesson and study, they would know your secrets.

The BACP study also explored children and young people's views of what they thought were the important features of a counsellor and a counselling service and some of the features they identified are summarised below.

Features of the counsellor

- Properly trained
- Experienced
- An understanding person
- Friendly, approachable, polite, kind and patient
- Unbiased
- Good listener, honest and confident
- Treat people equally
- Like children and young people
- Specialist knowledge
- Experience of bad behaviour and able to not judge children and young people on their behaviour

Features of the service

- Accessible but with a concealed (private) entrance
- Sound proof room
- Nicely furnished and comfortable
- Private and confidential
- Easy to drop in, e.g. at lunchtime
- Advertised so people know where to go
- Not just in school times or for children/young people in school
- Counsellor visible and offers group discussions about counselling in school
- Counsellors introduced to pupils more/shown around the school

Gillian Griffiths 2013⁶ scoping of the helpful and unhelpful factors in school-based counselling points to similar features of what children and young people find helpful about counselling and/or the barriers or deterrents to children and young people accessing counselling.

For example, helpful factors, in terms of what the counsellor had done, included: listening; offering ad-

⁶Griffiths, G. (2013) *Op Cit*

vice and suggestions; the counsellor being nice and friendly and expressing understanding; offering reassurances, doesn't criticise or judge.

Young people also identified that they had found the following helpful:

- The opportunity to talk
- The opportunity to reflect
- Being able to explore alternative ways of behaving
- Having the chance to 'get things off their chest'
- To be honest about how they were feeling
- The sense of acceptance
- The sense of being understood.

In terms of their experience of receiving counselling, identified helpful factors were that the counselling was:

- Confidential
- Relaxing
- Involved talking and being listened to
- An opportunity to talk openly and be listened to
- An opportunity for guidance, advice and problem-solving
- An opportunity for developing insight and self-awareness
- A self-directed process.

Unhelpful features of counselling included services not being sufficiently confidential or private, or breaching this and a range of practical issues to do with how the service was delivered.

Like the feedback comments from young people using community counselling provision, there were also some differences in opinion with regard to some young people wanting more direct advice and information than others, some finding the sessions too long or too short and so on.

A large evaluation of a counselling service operating in schools provided very similar comments. Drawing from a survey completed by just over 300 children and young people, including pupils from special schools, some of the best things about counselling included:

It's all confidential and anyone can go

Being able to speak to someone outside family and friends

Having space to talk about my problems

Discussing alternative options in managing behaviours and situations

Talking about problems to someone I didn't know

In terms of what children and young people didn't like, the survey identified: staying at first (for the first appointment); filling in forms; feeling vulnerable, speaking and saying the things that hurt me; sharing thoughts and feelings. Overall, the survey responses suggest that those consulted valued having a counsellor in their school, with comments including

I think it's a really good thing because it helps people with stuff they need sorting out

Very good no transport needed

It gives a sense of security to kids who can't talk to people back at home

However, some young people also expressed anxieties about other people seeing them/knowing they were seeing a counsellor, or described themselves as embarrassed and scared that people would judge them.

4.3 Evaluation and young people's feedback from Barnardo's Time 4 Me counselling service

A recent evaluation of Time 4 Me by Barnardo's Northern Ireland gathered feedback from 13 pupils from a range of different primary school class years. All of the children reported positive experiences of seeing a counsellor and gave the following explanations:

It was good because I could tell someone how I feel and it was all out and I just calmed down a bit instead of being all worked up

When they asked what they thought had helped, the majority response was that it was the "talking". In terms of what they thought had changed as a result of attending counselling, most felt that there was a change in how they were at home, in school or one a more personal level. For example, one reported that they would now be more likely to talk about their concerns than before:

Like if you were worried you know not to be scared to tell and just say it

Echoing the feedback from children and young people consulted about counselling, the 13 children consulted about Time 4 Me also identified confidentiality as important.

In terms of the positive outcomes of attending counselling identified by the children, these included improved self-confidence, feeling more happy and feeling more able to get on with their work at school.

An earlier evaluation of *Time 4 Me* produced similar findings.⁷

⁷ Barnardo's Northern Ireland (2012) *Breaking down barriers to learning: primary school-based counselling and support*. No 14 Policy and Practice Briefing

5. Findings from two workshops with youth counselling service staff about how to capture what children and young people value about counselling

5.1 Overview of the workshops

Two workshops were held, one in Manchester in February 2014 (8 participants) and one in March in London at the Youth Access offices (12 participants). Prior to each workshop, participants had received the report detailing the brief literature review (Children and Young People's Views of Counselling Provision: A Brief Review Street, 2014). and had been asked to gather information about the outcomes tools used in their counselling service.

5.2 What young people value about counselling

Attendees at both workshops confirmed that they agreed with the points raised in the short review of the literature. They highlighted the following aspects of counselling as the things they thought young people especially valued:

- Independence, choice and autonomy; promotes the sharing of decisions and validation that someone listens and understands them
- Autonomy of involvement - not family and not school
- Offer practical tools a young person can use outside of the session
- No labels given – do not diagnose (though at the Manchester workshop, it was highlighted that this poses a challenge in how to capture what is then worked with which may be quite different to what is mentioned at the point of referral)
- Consistency and regularity of counsellor
- Creative methods of engaging with young people
- The language is not patronising and is young person friendly – the counsellor is not 'the expert' and a young person's own experiences and coping mechanisms are encouraged and valued
- With regard to online counselling, the anonymity it offers
- The ability of services to offer a crisis response
- Not statutory
- Open ended (though this is increasingly challenging to offer given many services have growing waiting lists).

5.3 Use of outcomes tools

Both groups confirmed that they used a variety of outcomes tools, including their own in-house designed feedback questionnaires. Many use the tools before and after counselling and a number use them at reviews (typically held at 6 week intervals).

Tools mentioned included: CORE and YP CORE (although some of the group at the London workshop suggested that these can be too basic); SDQ; GAD 7 and SQIFER (this was reported to be used in many YOT settings).

It was noted that different funders/service contracts often have different requirements for outcomes monitoring; this is one of the challenges facing many youth counselling services.

It was highlighted that many services, whilst happy to use tools, have very limited capacity to actually extract and use the data – this capacity issue also means that it is crucial that whatever tools are used are quick and easy to use and do not generate too much paperwork. The cost of databases was noted as another barrier to outcomes data extraction/ analysis/use.

5.4 Limitations of current tools – what's not well captured and what would improve this situation

In both workshops, a general theme was that many outcomes tools appear to be more about outputs/ activity rather than capturing the more subtle aspects of a young person's psychological journey. It was also highlighted that the experience of being listened to, may help a young person to make a change but this does not necessarily mean that they will feel better, at least, not straightaway, and outcomes scores often do not reflect this.

Participants in the Manchester workshop identified the following as being poorly captured by existing tools:

Counselling recognises and supports change is personal, interpersonal or social – i.e. not clinical and therefore these changes are not well captured on outcomes forms; furthermore, in the opinion of a number of the participants, it seems that the only tools that are validated are ones that focus on clinical outcomes (measure symptoms).

- What young people want is to feel happier – how do you measure this in some quantifiable way? (It was also noted that this is not a commissioner priority)
- The pluralist nature of counselling – different approaches, sometimes in combination
- Scores often don't reflect change and tracking over time is difficult. They also mentioned the issue of scores worsening as a young person becomes more aware/gains insight into their difficulties
- Many tools don't measure what is important to young people... or the ripple effect of one thing possibly affecting another

The Manchester participants also noted that their focus on self-development, self-awareness and self

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resourcefulness is also met with a “so what?” response by commissioners and there is therefore a need to not only improve how outcomes can be demonstrated but also, to make the case for why these things are important in the first place.

Participants in the London workshop noted the following as poorly captured:

- The sense of progress or self-empowerment that many young people report - a young person's changed perspective of themselves, including their sense of hope
- Young people's ownership of the issues and solutions
- Changes in psychological state of young people in transition – which is often multi-faceted and can include health, educational and social transitions
- Nuance of the journey
- Longer-term impact of counselling – this is difficult not only on a practical level (young people move on) but also raises ethical questions (how appropriate is it, to go back to young people some time after they have finished counselling?)
- “Future pacing” - allowing young people to think/visualise what their life might be like in the future.

They also suggested that:

- Tools generally are not ‘adolescent relevant’ or personal enough to pick up on what is most important to young people and many seem very ‘medical’, symptom based and negative in their orientation – don't focus on young people's assets or resiliencies
- A major limitation is that they do not offer the opportunity to explain a particular score (the importance of understanding context and timing was highlighted by the group – somewhere to add a qualitative narrative explaining the scores given, would really improve many tools. Without this, tools can seem very mechanistic).

In both workshops, the participants also talked of aspects of counselling provision that are not adequately picked up in current outcomes monitoring tools and these included:

- The universal offer of support to families/parents/mothers offered by some services, including advice and consultation when parents phone in
- The work done to dovetail to other external agencies to offer support
- The work that goes behind making an external referral

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- The resources and capacity needed to manage high risk and crisis young people – or those needing to jump the waiting lists
- Transition work – the cross service negotiations and the ‘holding’ or bridging support often offered whilst a service transition is underway
- Many counselling services offer ‘low level’ maintenance/step down type of support (which may include one-to-one work but also groups etc). This is not a well documented area of activity but is very important especially since such support has largely disappeared from other sectors
- Actual work often at odds with what is reported (since areas of work not contracted for).

They also suggested that there were some other issues to consider in thinking about how to improve the gathering of outcomes data about youth counselling and these included:

- The referrer perspective – what data is there? Differing views and expectations
- Risks posed by single point of access arrangements and how this may change the nature of referrals to youth counselling
- Groups – may be used as way of managing waiting lists, or offering interim or transitional support – with these different reasons having an important influence on the sorts of outcomes you might expect or be looking for.

5.5 Counsellor training and how this influences practice

In both workshops it was highlighted that it is important to remember the diversity of training/qualifications offered by counsellors. Some may not have done a counselling course – e.g. may be trained in psychotherapy, art or music therapy, or trained in CBT. As a result many counsellors employ a wide range of tools and everyone’s approach is highly individualised. Many also use creative approaches.

Participants in the Manchester workshop also suggested that whereas once upon a time counsellors were often quite specific about the modality they worked in, nowadays most are more wide-ranging in their approach/the tools they use. They went on to say that there is a lot of common ground, in particular, an interest in co-creating a relationship with the client, working in a non-judgmental, empathetic and non-directive way to foster this.

Whatever the training, they suggested that most counsellors focus on promoting:

- A person’s strengths
- Resiliencies
- Self-regard.

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However, how these will be promoted is very age dependent (approach is obviously different with young children as opposed to older adolescents etc). The Manchester participants then noted that recognition of the core conditions is central to most people's work: they suggested there are 3 core conditions

- Unconditional positive regard
- Congruence
- Empathy.

Some ideas for how these conditions then affect actual counselling practice were explored and the group suggested that unconditional positive regard means that counsellors typically separate behaviour from the person; this core condition influences why they value/respect a person's wish to anonymity, why they work with the issues a young person identifies and at their pace; it is also shown in the way that counsellors 'hold' and offer containment.

With regard to congruence, they suggested that this is why counsellors try to work in ways that value the 'real' person, that honesty and transparency are important.

The impact of empathy is based on the following beliefs:

- That a person attending counselling is in an incongruent state but wants to come to counselling
- There will be a psychological contact between them – that is, a counsellor and young person will work together in a psychological way
- Verbalising empathy is important.

Participants in London echoed many of the points raised at the Manchester and they concurred that the teaching about 'core conditions' is central to how they then deliver counselling. However, they also noted that whilst how counsellors work is initially influenced by their training, the service setting, supervision arrangements and organisational culture all exert an influence over time in how exactly counsellors work.

Despite these variations, they suggested that the key principles underpinning the delivery of counselling in practice are that:

- It should be non-intrusive, reciprocal and based on mutual respect/self-regard, empathy and compassion
- It should be adaptable, flexible and responsive to the young person
- The approach should promote humility and self-awareness – the counsellor is not the expert, young people are their own experts

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- It should promote equality, recognising the importance of seeing things from the young person's/clients perspective
- Relationships are key; these need to be authentic or 'real' with the counsellor present and visible to the young person
- It should be non-stigmatising
- It should be confidential, with clear maintenance of boundaries of client and counsellor boundaries.

They also talked about working ethically and mentioned the BACP Code of Practice as an important influence on their work. The importance of counsellor selection, supervision and CPD processes was also debated and it was explained that most counselling services look for qualities within the counsellor (e.g. listening skills) or seek to develop these via training and supervision. An understanding of adolescence was widely viewed as a key attribute needed by those working in youth counselling with some counselling services requiring their counsellors to have some prior experience of working with young people in a voluntary capacity and others offering their own in-house training.

5. Summary and conclusions

Both the brief review of the literature and published feedback data from a range of sources and the information gathered through the two workshops convened by Youth Access in early 2014 highlight the distinctive and wide-ranging aspects of counselling provision that are valued by children and young people. This information also highlights the limitations with existing tools to adequately reflect the outcomes that both children and young people, and the staff working with them, recognise or seek to achieve.

The feedback young people give about their experience of counselling suggests that a number of interconnected factors play a key role in what they value or find helpful, these relating both to the skills and approach of counsellors themselves and to the style, culture or model of service delivery. In addition, it is apparent that there are age-related differences as to what children and young people find helpful - for example, in relation to where counselling is offered.

Running across all of the different counselling sectors or delivery models briefly reviewed (community, online and schools-based) there are some prominent themes as to what children and young people value above all else about counselling – namely that it offers a confidential ‘safe space’ where support is offered flexibly at a pace directed by the child or young person by staff with the skills to listen and empathise with children and young people, who do not criticise, judge or impose their own philosophies or beliefs on those seeking help – and these aspects of counselling were unanimously confirmed by the participants in both workshops.

This summary of what young people value in itself highlights the challenge of how to measure the outcomes of counselling in a way that truly captures the different and often quite subtle aspects of counselling provision. These subtleties were also prominent in both of the workshops where the limitations of existing tools were discussed in some detail, with suggestions being made for how to address some of these deficits in the future.