



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 21/22

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16TH FEBRUARY 2022

SCHOOL BASED COUNSELLING

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND INCLUSION SERVICES

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide Elected Members with an overview of the provision and effectiveness of counselling services for children and young people in Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) during the academic year 2020/21 and to inform Elected Members of current plans to ensure ongoing provision that meets the needs of service users.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Scrutinise and comment on the information contained within this report.
- 2.2 Consider if any further information is required.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 On 1st April 2013 the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 came into force. This Act places a statutory duty on local authorities (LAs) to provide an independent counselling service in respect of health, emotional and social needs for children and young people in their area.
- 3.2 At the same time that this new Act came into force, the specific grant funding for independent counselling services transferred to Local Authorities' Revenue Support Grants as part of the Local Government Settlement. LAs are consequently

required to make reasonable provision of counselling services for children and young people aged between 11 and 18 and for year 6 pupils. All children and young people residing in RCT are entitled to access counselling services, irrespective of whether they attend school or not.

- 3.3 The 2013 Act requires the LA to provide an independent counselling service on the site of each secondary school that it maintains and also offer counselling services at other locations for young people who are not in school and/or wish to access counselling outside of a formal education setting.
- 3.4 Within schools, counselling is a specialist intervention that complements other approaches to support the health and wellbeing of learners, such as school based wellbeing interventions and pastoral support or more specialist interventions from LA central support teams such as the Educational Psychology Service or Behaviour Support Service, as well as services provided externally through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- 3.5 The appointment of counselling services in each LA is carried out via a tendering process every three to five years. In RCT the Eye to Eye Young People's Counselling Service is currently contracted to provide the statutory service within schools and in the community. In addition to the statutory requirements of the 2013 Act, the LA commissions Eye to Eye to provide counselling services to primary aged pupils aged 7–10 years (Academic Years 3–5) and for young people from age 19–25 years. The current contract has been in place since July 2019 and is due to end in August 2022.
- 3.6 Eye to Eye is a registered charity comprising of a professional team of fully qualified counsellors who are registered with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) and who practice in line with the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy. The organisation consists of 17 employed counsellors (10 fte) and 6 volunteer counsellors who work in the community setting in the evening. Volunteer counsellors may still be in training but their practice is supervised by a fully qualified and BACP certified counsellor. Community based counselling is provided in community buildings on the site of Bryncelynog Comprehensive School and 4 outreach centres across the county borough.
- 3.7 During the academic year (2017/18) a Counselling Service Management Board was established, comprising representation from the Educational Psychology Service, Children Looked After (CLA) team, Attendance and Wellbeing Service (AWS), Youth Engagement service, a local Secondary Headteacher, LA Funding Flexibilities Team and the Eye to Eye Counselling Service. The purpose of the management board, is to ensure that the Eye to Eye Counselling Service is meeting the requirements set out in their contract, that the service provided meets the needs of children and young people in RCT and to consider the necessary requirements of an effective counselling service for children and young people, as we move towards the next tendering process.

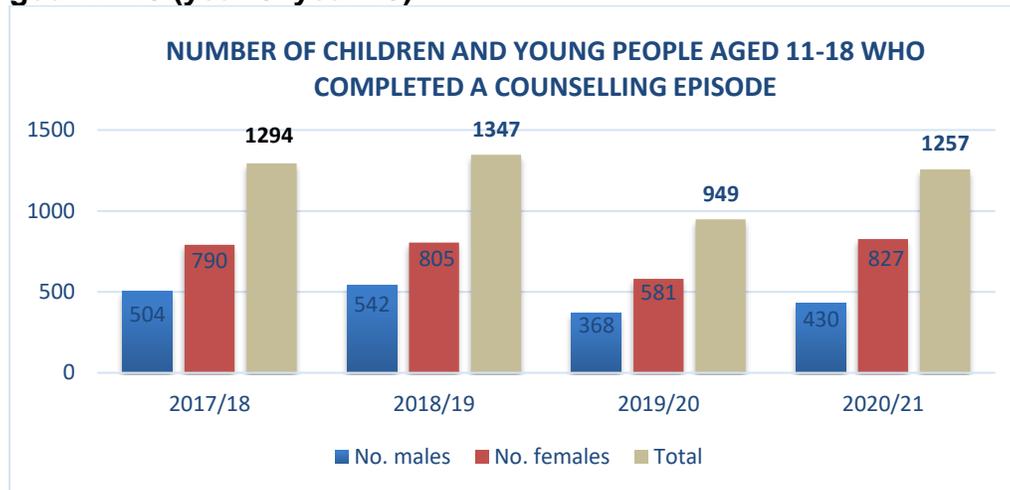
- 3.8 For the financial year 2020/21 Welsh Government provided all local authorities across Wales with additional funding to enhance their school and community-based counselling provision due to the anticipated increased need to support the emotional and mental wellbeing of learners as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. RCT received additional funding of £102,364 which was used to support priority areas specified by Welsh Government for the use of the funding: reducing waiting lists for counselling and increasing capacity; facilitating the delivery of support to young people in line with current requirements around social distancing; supporting work already underway to meet the needs of young people below the current year 6 statutory counselling threshold. References to the use of additional funding and impact will be linked to the appropriate sections of the report.
- 3.9 In March 2021, Welsh Government published its statutory guidance '*Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental health wellbeing*'. The school-based Step 4 model is supported by the overarching principles outlined in the Framework, which include:
- The responsibility for all school staff to take a whole-school approach to the promotion of good mental health and emotional wellbeing is universal and integral to a successful school environment.
 - A whole-school approach that puts the child at the centre of decisions made about them needs partnership and involvement with families, the community, other statutory bodies and the third sector.
 - A whole-school approach promotes equity for all, reducing variation and using evidence-based practices consistently and transparently, in terms of both use of data for planning and any interventions.
- 3.10 As part of its overarching strategy to support a whole-school approach to wellbeing Welsh Government has provided further grant funding to local authorities for the financial year 2021/22 of which RCT received an initial allocation of £143,080 and a further £119,592 in September 2021 following a successful proposal for additional resources. The Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing Funding has been made available specifically to support the changing mental health needs of children and young people in Wales, and in recognition of the effect that being away from school and other regular networks has had on young people during the pandemic. An overview of targeted grant funded activities is provided within the body of this report.

4. UPDATE/CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 Graph 1 details the number of young people who completed counselling during the four-year period from 2017/18 to 2020/21. The graph shows an increase in the number of children and young people aged 11-18 completing counselling support in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. However, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during academic year 2019/20, whereby lengthy periods of school closure resulted in a significant reduction in referrals from schools, it is not possible to make direct data comparisons between the last two academic years. It is

considered more reliable to view the data over the four-year period indicated in Graph 1 which includes data for two academic years prior to the pandemic. In this context, the graph shows that the number of young people completing counselling in 2020/21 is slightly lower than the numbers reported in the two academic years prior to COVID-19, reflecting a slight reduction for this age group compared to 2017/18 and 2018/19. This in turn reflects a reduction in the number of referrals received in 2020/21 compared to 2017/18 and 2018/19.

Graph 1: Number of children and young people who completed counselling aged 11–18 (year 6–year 13)



4.2 During this four-year period, significantly more females than males continue to complete counselling, with males representing only 34% of the overall cohort. This is a decrease of 5% compared to 2019/20 and the lowest percentage of males completing counselling within this cohort since 2017/18.

4.3 As previously reported, poor engagement of males in counselling is an ongoing matter of concern across Wales and not an issue that relates specifically to RCT. Eye to Eye have undertaken a number of actions to promote the use of counselling services to males. These include:

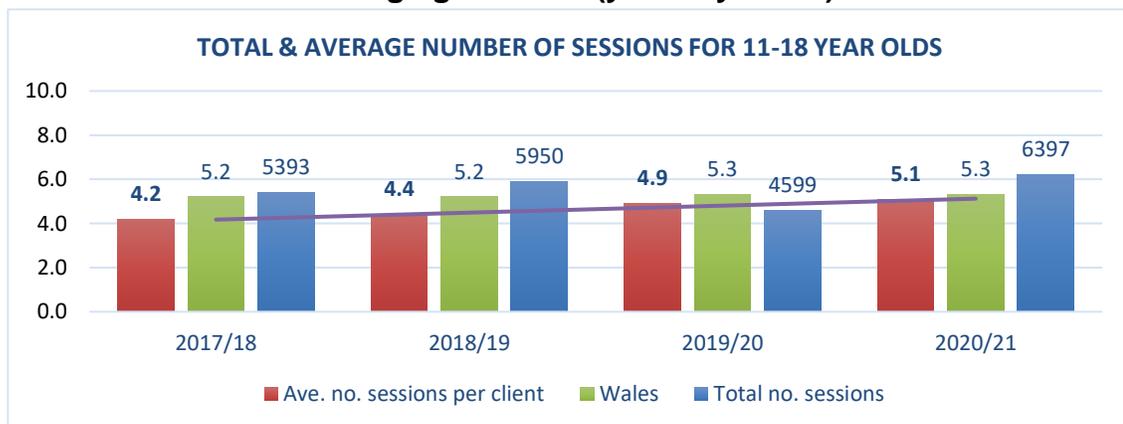
- The introduction of an electronic referral system for schools so that male pupils do not have to leave class to attend counselling but can discreetly access online counselling at home.
- Collaboration with Interlink, New Horizons Mental Health, Valley Steps and Valleys Kids to promote therapy through flyers and online messages.
- Targeted advertising on Facebook to adult males to encourage young male engagement.
- Recruitment of 2 outreach response workers via Lottery funding, who visit community groups, e.g. Gilfach Goch youth project, and target males to discuss mental health and how to seek support.
- Development of integrated pathways to take into account all agencies working with young people and males.

- Use of the Youth Engagement and Participation Service (YEPS) online platform to encourage males to seek help.
- Working alongside primary schools to upskill staff on recognising specific behaviours in male pupils who may benefit from counselling support.
- Targeted social media information for rugby/football clubs promoting mental health engagement.

4.4 Due to ongoing concerns regarding the uptake of males in counselling services, an element of the additional funding provided by Welsh Government for 2021/22 is being used to undertake a project designed specifically to identify the reasons for their low engagement. This information will be used by the Counselling Management Board to identify collaborative strategic actions to address identified barriers to males accessing counselling and also to consider the contribution that alternative support services could make in supporting the mental health wellbeing of young males. The project will be supported by the production of a short film in which young males talk about their mental health, barriers to seeking support and completing counselling.

4.5 Graph 2 indicates that the average number of counselling sessions attended by young people over the last four academic years has increased annually from 4.2 in 2017/18 to 5.1 in 2020/21. This is slightly lower than the national average of 5.3. (National data is not yet published for 2020/21 and, therefore, until this is available, 2019/20 national data is used for comparison). The 6,397 sessions in 2020/21 consisted of 3,723 face-to-face sessions and 2,674 remote sessions.

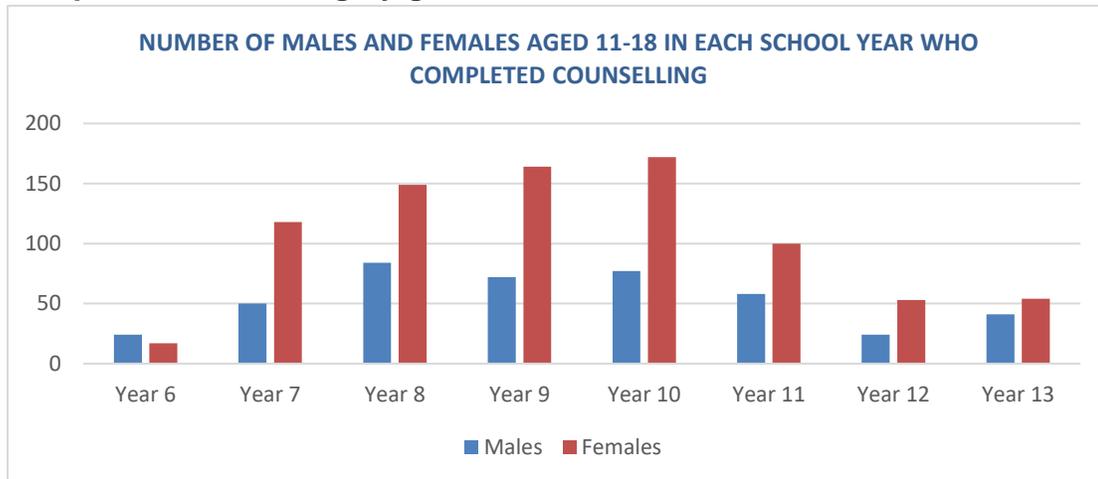
Graph 2: Number of sessions attended by young people who completed counselling aged 11–18 (year 6–year 13)



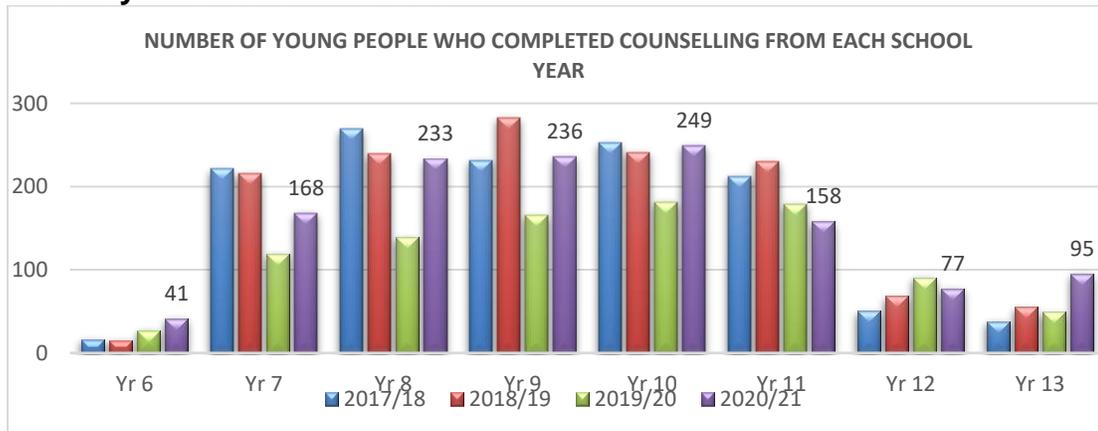
4.6 Data in Graph 3 indicates that during academic year 2020/21, year 10 (249), year 9 (236) and year 8 (233) pupils used the counselling service the most. Despite this being a general trend over the past 4 years, there was a notable percentage increase of 37.5%, 43% and 67.6% respectively in the numbers completing counselling within these year groups in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. Although a much smaller cohort, the number of young people completing counselling in year

13 was significantly higher than any previous year, with a 94% increase in 2020/21 to the previous academic year as illustrated in Graph 4. Despite an increase of 51% in the number of year 6 pupils completing counselling the number remains low overall in comparison to other year groups but has shown a steady increase since 2017/18.

Graph 3: Number of young people aged 11-18 in each school year who completed counselling by gender

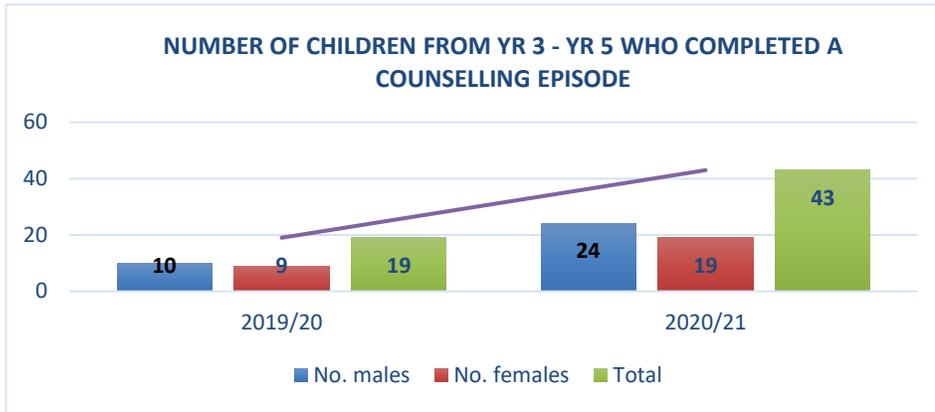


Graph 4 – Number of young people who completed counselling from each school year 2017/18 to 202/21



4.7 Under the current contract, Eye to Eye has been commissioned to provide counselling services to primary aged children in school years 3-5 since September 2019. As such, comparison data is only available over 2 academic years. The number of referrals received for this age group in 2020/21 increased in comparison to 2019/20. In turn, the number of year 3-5 pupils completing counselling increased by 70% in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20 as illustrated in Graph 5. It is encouraging to note that, of the 43 children who completed counselling sessions, 55.8% were males.

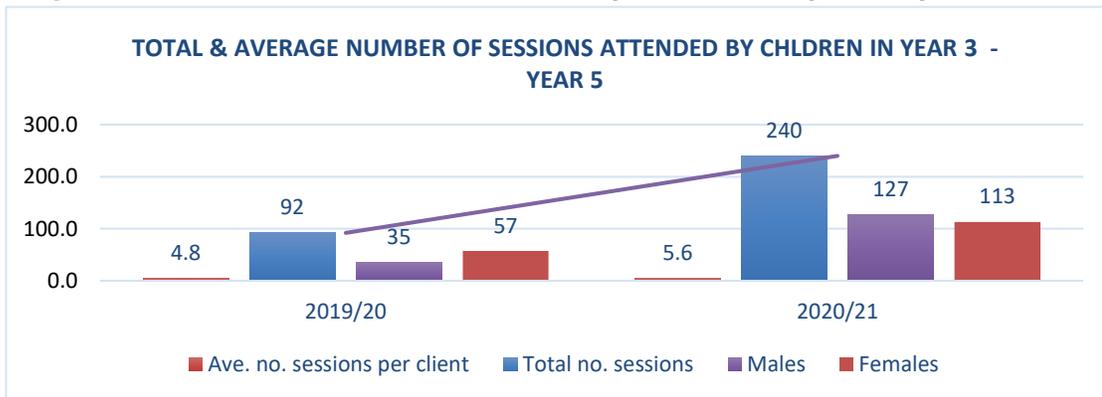
Graph 5: Number of children from year 3– year 5 who completed a counselling episode



4.8 The criterion for referral into counselling for the year 3-5 cohort is in place to support pupils suffering from significant trauma or bereavement/loss. As such, children attending counselling in this cohort have very complex needs and require a collaborative approach that involves parents in supporting counselling therapy objectives. Primary counsellors work closely with the Resilient Families Team to ensure there is an all-family approach to the emotional and mental health of young clients.

4.9 Graph 6 demonstrates that the average number of counselling sessions attended by children in years 3–5 over the past two academic years has increased from 4.8 in 2019/20 to 5.6 in 2020/21. This, combined with the increase in the number of children in this cohort completing counselling has resulted in a significant increase in the total number of sessions delivered. Of the 240 sessions 54 were delivered face to face and 186 were delivered remotely.

Graph 6: Number of sessions attended by children in year 3–year 5



4.10 Table 1 demonstrates the percentage of young people with special characteristics completing counselling, as a proportion of the total number of young people who completed counselling. These special characteristics include Special Educational Needs (SEN), a registered disability or where a child is looked after (CLA) by the LA. Despite a slight percentage decrease in the number of young people with special characteristics completing counselling in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20 it is pleasing to note that the actual number of young people accessing counselling increased significantly to near pre-COVID levels. The number of CLA completing

counselling remains low, and due to the very low numbers involved, fluctuations in terms of increases and decreases are inevitable.

Table 1: Percentage of young people with special characteristics

Year	Group	Total	Total No. C&YP who had counselling	%
2020/21	SEN	80	1,257	6%
	Disability	21		1.6%
	CLA	19		1.5%
2019/20	SEN	85	949	9%
	Disability	23		2%
	CLA	21		2%
2018/19	SEN	109	1,347	8%
	Disability	44		3%
	CLA	14		1%
2017/18	SEN	136	1,294	11%
	Disability	24		2%
	CLA	15		1%

- 4.11 Eye to Eye has worked collaboratively with Children’s Services and the CLA Education Team to facilitate referrals for CLA to the service, including a system for social workers to refer directly to the service for CLA living both in and out of county, promotional activities for staff and foster carers and the development of a fast track system for CLA and at-risk young people to the service.
- 4.12 Eye to Eye has reported that it is likely that the numbers of CLA completing counselling are under-represented due to factors such as referrers not always being aware of the CLA status of children and children and young people who self-refer or who are looked after by relatives not always identifying themselves as CLA. Eye to Eye report that they are working with relevant agencies to clarify the above.
- 4.13 Whilst recognising the benefits of counselling for many of our learners, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of other approaches that may be considered more appropriate to address the very significant and complex needs of CLA than traditional school-based counselling. Research tells us that approaches led or contributed to by adults who know the child and that involve the main carer for consistency are likely to achieve the best outcomes for CLA. Children who have experienced developmental trauma need time to develop trust in adults which is more easily achieved with adults they know and who are present

throughout the week in other aspects of their life. In such cases, a key worker, relationship-based approach is considered to be more effective than working with external adults through a time-limited formal counselling model. To this end, the CLA Education team offers a comprehensive support package for schools, foster carers and residential staff, to enhance their expertise in how to implement a range of effective evidence-based approaches and interventions to support CLA learners. These include:

- Training for foster carers which includes Parenting with PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) (6 week course), LSA and Emotion Coaching.
- CLA Friendly School Training.
- Training on attachment and Introduction to PACE for schools.
- Training for residential staff in care homes in ELSA, emotion coaching and relationship-based play.
- Circle of Understanding meetings and Enhanced Case Management for CLA who are struggling with their wellbeing.

4.14 An analysis of the gender differences exhibited for the five most common forms of predominant issues for young people aged 11-18 years is highlighted in Table 2. In 2020/21, 'anxiety' maintained its status as the predominant issue for young people aged 11-18 years for the second consecutive academic year, replacing 'family' as the predominant issue for the previous three academic years. Apart from 'Relationships other', which replaced 'Anger', all four other issues are the same as last academic year. Eye to Eye report that anxiety relating to COVID-19 is the main presenting issue for the second academic year, with significant and complex anxieties relating to having lost or fearing the loss of a parent to COVID, the death of someone close due to COVID and limited availability of support services during the pandemic presenting as the predominant themes within this area.

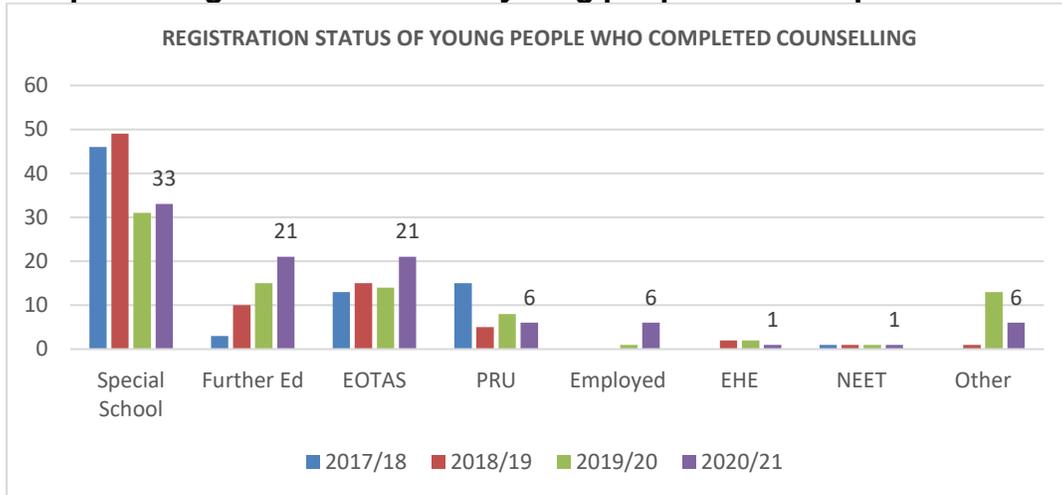
Table 2: 2020/21 Gender split for the five most common predominant issues for young people aged 11-18 years

Gender split for the five most common predominant issues for young people aged 11-18 years			
	Male	Female	Total
Anxiety	162	387	549
Family	128	264	392
Self-worth	69	163	232
Bereavement	68	84	152
Relationships other	34	97	131

4.15 The predominant issue for primary aged children in years 3-5 in 2020/21 was 'anxiety', closely followed by 'bereavement' and 'family' issues.

4.16 The majority of young people aged 11-18 who completed counselling (1,167 out of the overall cohort of 1,257 young people) were registered at mainstream schools. The lower figures from provisions other than mainstream school are reflective of the lower numbers of young people attending these different provisions and are consistent with data over the past four academic years. Graph 7 demonstrates the provisions attended by those completing counselling who did not attend mainstream schools.

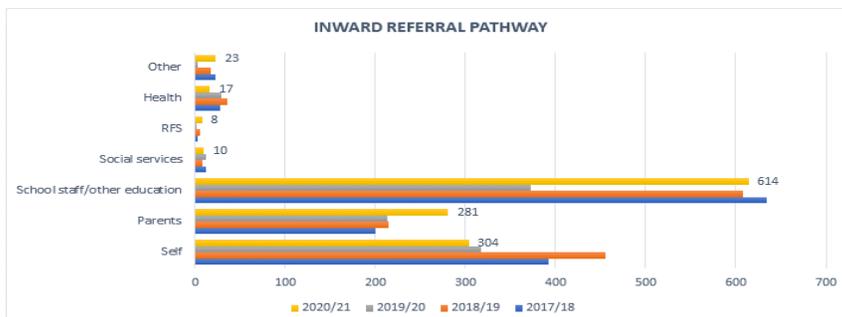
Graph 7: Registration status of young people who completed counselling



4.17 Following a notable reduction in the number of referrals made to the counselling service during 2019/20, largely as a result of school closures, the number of referrals increased across both the 11-18 year old (year 6–year 13) and the year 3–year 5 cohorts in 2020/21. At 1,388 the number of year 6–year 13 referrals for 2020/21 are still slightly below the 1,472 referrals received in 2018/19. Graph 8 shows the number of inward referrals relating to children and young people who completed counselling over academic year 2020/21. The majority of these referrals continue to be made by school staff. In 2020/21, 49% of referrals were made by schools or other educational establishments, 24% through self-referral and 22% made by parents. The other 5% were made by Health, Social Services and ‘other’. This data has been consistent over the past four academic years.

4.18 The high number of parental and self-referrals suggests a high level of awareness of the counselling service and is a positive indicator that young people, in particular females, are proactively choosing to seek help and engage in counselling.

Graph 8: Inward referral pathway



- 4.19 Information has been gathered in relation to young people who did not complete counselling following a referral. Previous concerns relating to the high number of unsuitable referrals received by the service resulted in the development of an integrated referral pathway in 2019. The pathway provides guidance to schools and other referring agencies regarding a range of approaches and interventions that should be considered as part of a graduated response to meeting the needs of young people prior to making a referral to Eye to Eye. The pathway also provides guidance on alternative support/interventions that may be deemed more appropriate than counselling to support the individual young person's needs. Following the implementation of the pathway, the number of unsuitable referrals declined to only 1.8% of the overall number of referrals in 2019/20 compared to 4.1% in 2017/18. Although this figure increased to 3.2% during 2020/21 it is encouraging that only 0.7% of the overall percentage were deemed unsuitable due to not following the pathway. Other reasons included pupils moving out of area, issues being resolved, support being accessed elsewhere and poor engagement due to attendance issues at school. Positively, only 4.5% of young people who were accepted for counselling declined to take part compared to 10.5% in 2019/20.
- 4.20 In relation to the length of time children and young people have to wait for counselling following referral, it is not possible to make direct comparisons with previous trend data. This is due to a change in the way that waiting times are now recorded whereby working days have replaced calendar days. Consequently, a new baseline for monitoring performance for waiting times will be established from 2020/21 onwards. Data for 2020/21 indicates that 84% of young people commenced counselling within 20 working days of referral with a further 11% attending their first session between 20-30 working days. Although not a direct comparison, 89% of young people aged 11-18 commenced counselling within 30 calendar days of referral in 2019/20. This suggests that improvement to waiting times has been sustained since the introduction of the referral pathway and referral triage system in 2019.
- 4.21 Data relating to the waiting times for children in year 3–5 is less positive with 64% commencing counselling within 20 working days and a further 21% within 20–24 days. In 2019/20, 77% of this cohort received their first counselling session within 20 calendar days.
- 4.22 In comparison, 97% of young people aged 19-25 received their first session within 20 working days.
- 4.23 Additional Welsh Government funding provided to local authorities during the financial year 2020/21 to reduce waiting lists for school-based counselling was used to provide an additional 316 counselling sessions to young people in both the Easter and Summer holiday periods during academic year 2019/20. It is likely that this contributed to the reduction in waiting times for young people from September 2020 onwards. Additionally, an element of the Welsh Government additional funding was used to enhance the capacity of the Youth Engagement & Participation Service (YEPS) to deliver a pre and post counselling support initiative

designed specifically to support learner wellbeing during the COVID-19 period. This enhanced support provided over 360 one-to-one sessions to young people remotely, with most sessions undertaken outside of school hours, during evenings and weekends. Support offered to young people included talking sessions, sleeping and relaxation techniques, mindfulness activities and anxiety management for when they are on school site.

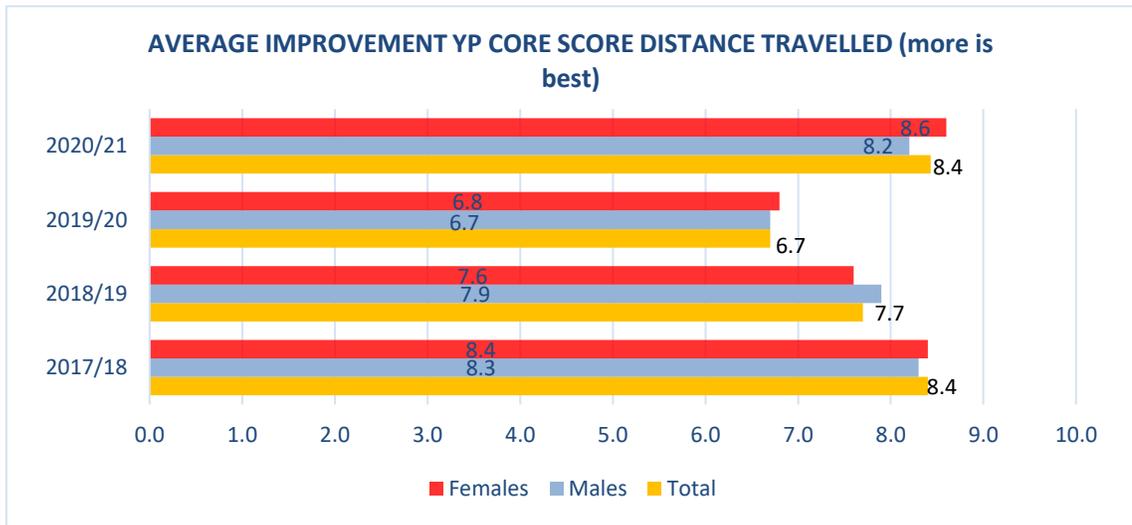
4.24 In addition, between April and August 2021, a further 20 of the young people aged 11-18 completed 71 sessions of counselling by recruiting additional temporary counsellors to the Service through the use of the 2021/22 Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing Funding. This additional funding will be used to provide enhanced counselling services to more young people during academic year 2021/22.

4.25 Other activities identified for expenditure of the above additional funding include:

- The YEPS First Step Forward Project which provides support to young people who are struggling to attend school due to anxiety and other related wellbeing issues.
- The engagement of pilot schools in the co-creation of a Peer to Peer Emotional and Wellbeing Support Service.
- Education & Wellbeing Theatre Programme – interactive drama wellbeing workshop.
- A range of training opportunities including Trauma Informed Approaches and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy that will enhance the capacity and expertise of schools and central specialist support services to support the emotional wellbeing of learners.

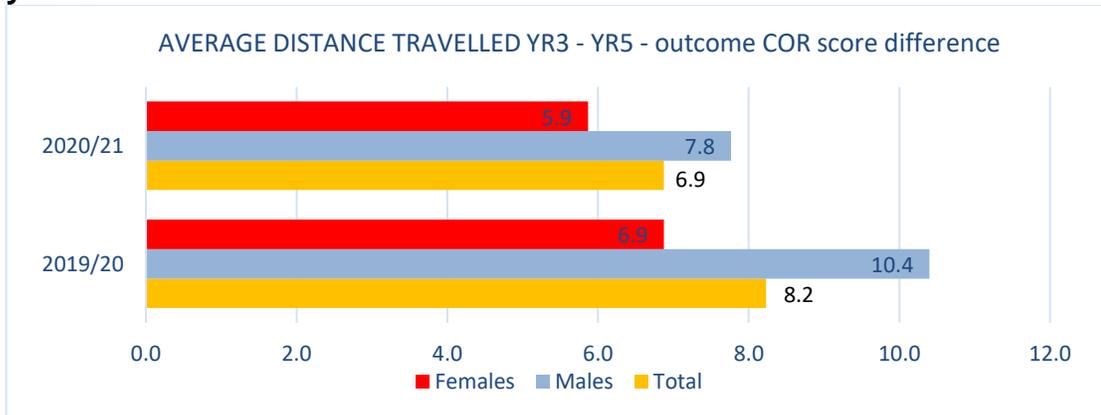
4.26 In order to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of counselling Eye to Eye uses the Young Person's CORE assessment for young people aged 11-18 years old. This is a 10 item self-report measure of emotional wellbeing and is a useful tool for measuring progress. Scores from the first and last counselling sessions are measured to evaluate the impact of therapeutic intervention upon the young people's emotional distress. Concerns were raised in the previous report to Children and Young People Scrutiny committee regarding the year on year decline in the average improvement in the Young Person's CORE score for this cohort between 2017/18 and 2019/20, notwithstanding the fact that Eye to Eye highlighted the unprecedented impact of COVID upon the complexity of issues experienced by clients as the major contributory factor to the notable decline in 2019/20. Encouragingly, the CORE score for 2020/21 demonstrates improvement for the first time in the past four academic year period, with an average improvement of 1.7 points compared to 2019/20. (See Graph 9)

Graph 9: Average Improvement Young People CORE Score (11-18 year olds)



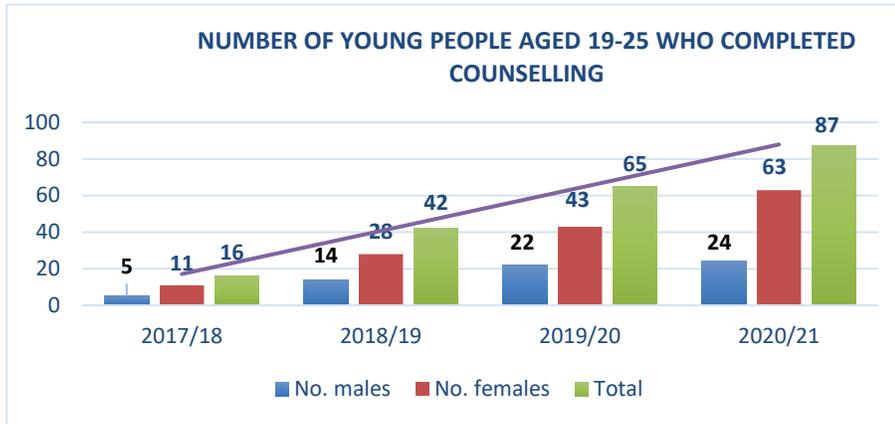
4.27 The impact of counselling for the year 3 to year 5 cohort is measured by the COR assessment. This is a simple, session by session four-item self-report measure designed to assess areas of life functioning known to change as a result of therapeutic input. The scores from the first session and last session are measured to provide the therapeutic movement of emotional distress during counselling sessions with a lower score at the last session indicating improvement. As illustrated in Graph 10, the average improvement gain for children in years 3–5 during 2020/21 demonstrated reduced impact overall in comparison to 2019/20. Eye to Eye report that this can be attributed to the increased severity of need amongst this cohort due to COVID related issues combined with the majority of counselling sessions being delivered online, resulting in less meaningful engagement of children in interactive therapy approaches such as play-based counselling which are considered most effective when delivered face-to-face.

Graph 10: Average Improvement Young People COR for children in year 3-year 5



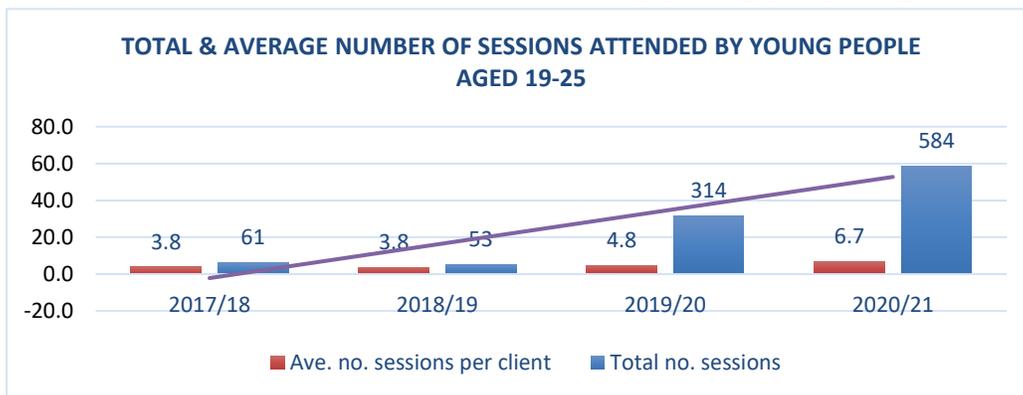
4.28 Eye to Eye has seen a year on year increase in the number of young people aged 19-25 years completing counselling since 2017/18 as demonstrated in Graph 11 below. Despite targeted interventions to encourage more males to take up counselling, the percentage of males completing counselling in 2020/21 decreased to 28% of the overall cohort compared to 34% in 2019/20 and 31% in 2017/18.

Graph 11: Number of Young People aged 19-25 who completed counselling



4.29 Graph 12 highlights a significant increase in the number of counselling sessions attended by the 19-25 age cohort for the second consecutive academic year with the average number of sessions attended increasing from 4.8 in 2019/20 to 6.7 in 2020/21. Eye to Eye have reported that remote delivery all sessions to this cohort due to COVID was more time-efficient, which allowed the service to increase the number of available sessions.

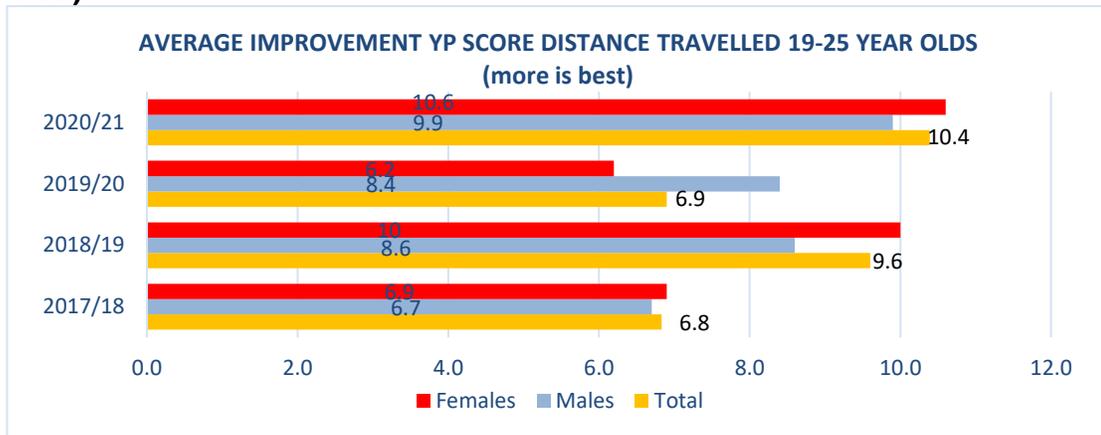
Graph 12: Number of sessions attended by young people aged 19-25



4.30 Data indicates that the most significant predominant issue for young people aged 19-25 in 2020/21 was 'anxiety', followed by 'family', 'depression', 'self-worth' and 'bereavement' respectively as the top 5 presenting predominant issues.

4.31 The effectiveness and impact of counselling on young people aged 19-25 is measured using the Young Person's CORE Score. Following a significant decline in the average improvement score from 9.6 in 2018/19 to 6.9 in 2019/20, there has been a notable improvement with an average improvement score of 10.4 in 2020/21, as illustrated in Graph 13. This is attributed in the main to the ability of the service to offer an increased number of sessions to clients.

Graph 13: Average Improvement Young People CORE Score (19-25 year olds)



4.32 Service evaluations are carried out every year with the young people using the service. It is not mandatory for service users to complete an evaluation. The number of evaluations completed for 2020/21 increased significantly from 372 evaluations in 2019/20 to 763 in 2020/21. The outcomes are extremely positive with regards their views of counselling as an effective way of dealing with their problems and, notably for the youngest cohort, with regards their voice/views being listened to and valued.

Table 4: Service Evaluations completed by service users aged 11-18 years (year 6–year 13) and aged 19-25 years

	Yr 6-Yr13	19-25
No. evaluations completed	706 (54%)	34 (39%)
% easy to get an appointment	98%	94%
% a good way of dealing with your problems	96%	100%
% impression of the service was 'good' or 'great	94%	100%

Table 5: Service Evaluations completed by service users in year 3-year 5

	Yr 3-Yr 5
No. evaluations completed	23 (53%)
% they were listened too	98%
% what they talked about was important.	93%
% liked what they did.	98%
% would like to do it again.	96%

5. **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 An Equality Impact Assessment is not required as the contents of this report are for information purposes only.

6. CONSULTATION

6.1 No consultation exercises have been undertaken.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

7.1 The current contract with Eye to Eye Counselling Services is for 3 years and expires 31/08/22 with the option to extend for a further year. The current value of the contract is £400k and increased from £376k during 2019/20. The contract is reported within the financial position of Community and Children's Services Group.

7.2 In addition to the above, Welsh Government have provided the following additional funding via the Local Authority Education Grant:

- 2020/21 £102,364
- 2021/22 £143,080
- 2021/22 £119,592 (additional grant award)

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

8.1 There are no legal implications aligned to this report.

9. LINKS TO THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN/OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/SIP

9.1 One of the key priorities of the RCT Corporate Plan 2020-2024 Making a Difference is to 'Encourage residents to lead active and healthy lifestyles and maintain their mental wellbeing'. It is considered that an effective counselling service is key to ensuring that the needs of vulnerable young people are met, in order for them to develop independent coping strategies, build good mental health and positive lives. The vision and working practices of the counselling service support the council to implement the Wellbeing Goals of the Wellbeing for Future Generations Act (Wales).

10. CONCLUSION

10.1 Following a significant reduction in the number of children and young people being referred for counselling during 2019/20, largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is encouraging to note that there was an overall increase in the number of children and young people referred for counselling during academic year 2020/21 compared to 2019/20. This, in turn, resulted in an increase in the number of children and young people who completed counselling during 2020/21 compared to 2019/20.

10.2 In September 2019, Eye to Eye counselling services were extended to include primary children aged 7-10 years (years 3-5). Baseline data established in 2019/20 indicates a notable increase in the number of children in this cohort completing counselling in 2020/21, together with a significant increase in the number of sessions delivered.

- 10.3 Despite the implementation of a number of targeted approaches to promote the use of counselling services to males, their uptake in counselling remains low compared to females. It is hoped that the male engagement project undertaken by Eye to Eye through the use of additional Welsh Government grant funding during academic year 2021/22 will provide an in-depth understanding of the reasons that males are reluctant to engage in counselling and enable the local authority and Eye to Eye to address this issue and identify potential new approaches to support the emotional and mental health of young males. However, it is positive to note that the engagement of males is strongest at 55.8% within the youngest cohort of children and young people who completed counselling (years 3-5) suggesting a positive impact of the targeted approaches taken collaboratively by Eye to Eye with primary schools to identify and encourage young male learners who would benefit from counselling. It will be important to undertake further analysis of the underlying factors that have contributed to increased engagement of males amongst our youngest children as part of our strategy to improve the overall engagement of males in counselling.
- 10.4 A slight decrease was observed in the number of children and young people with special characteristics who completed counselling. This is not surprising due to the impact of COVID upon service delivery, such as the use of remote counselling sessions, which young people who fall into this category would find particularly difficult to engage with. In addition, in response to the pandemic, specialist settings and designated persons for CLA have worked collaboratively with Education and Children's Services to implement an enhanced range of protocols and school-based wellbeing interventions to support the emotional and mental health needs of their learners and families as an alternative to formal counselling.
- 10.5 The predominant issues for children and young people who have completed counselling are broadly consistent to previous years, with 'anxiety' recorded as the main reason for all age groups of children and young people requiring counselling. For the second consecutive academic year, issues relating to the COVID pandemic have been the overwhelming contributor to the anxieties cited by children and young people during counselling sessions.
- 10.6 Despite changes implemented in 2020/21 in relation to monitoring waiting times for counselling following referral (working not calendar days), data suggests that improvements reported in 2019/20 have been sustained for children and young people in the 11-18 and 19-25 age cohorts. Data is less positive for children in the year 3-5 cohort. However, it is important to acknowledge that the judgements above have not been based on direct comparative data and the waiting time data recorded in 2020/21 will become the new baseline for ongoing performance evaluation.
- 10.7 Data for 2020/21 indicates that there has been a decrease in the number of young people who have declined to take part in counselling following a referral. This, together with the high number of self-referrals made by young people and parental referrals, suggests that the strategies implemented by Eye to Eye to promote awareness of the counselling service to young people and their families are having a positive impact.

- 10.8 For the first time in the past four academic years Eye to Eye has reported improved performance in the Young Person's CORE Score for both the 11-18 and 19-25 age cohorts, indicating that the service has been more effective in addressing the issues presented by these young people. This is attributed in the main to the increase in the average number of counselling sessions attended by both cohorts of young people. Unfortunately, this was not the case for the year 3–year 5 cohort where a decline in performance was observed. Reasons cited by Eye to Eye to account for this decline relate to the complexity of issues faced by the children as a result of the COVID pandemic, the negative impact of online counselling sessions upon the delivery of counselling therapy approaches specific to young children and the impact of COVID upon the wellbeing of parents whose support and engagement in supporting the strategies introduced to their children during counselling sessions is a key factor to the successful outcome of counselling for children in this young cohort.
- 10.9 Service evaluations completed by service users clearly indicate that the children and young people who completed counselling in 2020/21 valued the support that they received, reporting overwhelmingly how effective it was in solving their issues and meeting their needs. This is consistent with service user feedback over the past four years.
- 10.10 Effective use has been made of the additional funding provided by Welsh Government to enhance counselling services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding has supported both Eye to Eye in providing additional services to young people and their families and the local authority in developing innovative and collaborative approaches to support the wellbeing of children and young people.
- 10.11 Moving forward it will be essential to consider how the role of school-based counselling can support the vision articulated in the recently published Welsh Government strategy '*Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental health wellbeing*'. The 'Framework' sets out a clearly defined process for schools to work collaboratively with a range of external agencies, including school-based counselling services, to develop both universal and targeted provision to support the wellbeing of all their learners.
- 10.12 To facilitate the implementation of the Framework, Welsh Government has provided additional grant funding for a second financial year (2021/22). This is enabling the local authority to build upon the initiatives, training and additional support for wellbeing developed under the initial grant period in 2019/20.
- 10.13 Taking a collaborative multi-agency approach to supporting the wellbeing of learners will be essential to enable schools to develop their expertise in meeting a more diverse range of emotional and mental health wellbeing needs without the need for onward referrals to external agencies. Adopting a robust whole-school approach to wellbeing in line with the requirements of the Framework, should, in turn, provide enhanced capacity for specialist external services such as school-based counselling and health based mental health services to provide more intensive support for the children and young people with the most significant needs.

In light of the above, the Eye to Eye referral pathway that has been successfully embedded over the past two academic years will be revised and refined in collaboration with the Education Psychology Service, other relevant agencies and schools to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

- 10.14 Despite the availability of grant funding to enhance the level of school-based counselling provision on offer to children and young people, Eye to Eye has faced significant challenges in recruiting additional qualified counsellors on temporary short-term contracts to fulfil this additional requirement. Eye to Eye reports that this is a common issue across Wales. This issue has been highlighted to Welsh Government in all-Wales meetings. Whilst additional grant funding is always welcomed, the short-term nature of grants does not enable the local authority to undertake long-term strategic planning to develop effective enhanced school-based counselling provision.
- 10.15 Due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the mental health and wellbeing of learners, their families and the wider school community the need to provide effective, high quality, co-ordinated and evidence-based support for wellbeing continues to be one of the local authority's highest priorities. Working collectively to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people reflects the ethos of the national Framework that values inclusion, effective collaboration for the collective good and the creation of a '*supporting environment where young people are encouraged to fulfil their personal and academic potential, where they thrive, learn and emotionally develop*'.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972
AS AMENDED BY
THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985
RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
16TH FEBRUARY 2022
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
AND INCLUSION SERVICES

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