

COUNSELLING IN SCHOOLS
A SURVEY OF THE VIEWS OF SCHOOL STAFF AND PUPILS
IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Carried out for the NSPCC

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INTRODUCTION

Context

This survey was initiated by the Divisional Office of the NSPCC to contribute to an evaluation of the work of the School Teams in Northern Ireland, which had been established in the school year 2000-2001. It would collect largely quantitative information on the views of teachers, classroom assistants and pupils in schools about the counselling services run by the Teams and would complement the findings of a qualitative study running alongside. The survey was conducted during October and November 2002.

In the event, it was decided to publish the qualitative and quantitative reports separately. As far as this report is concerned, it should be borne in mind that the findings and observations are based solely on the written responses of the teachers, classroom assistants and pupils who returned the questionnaires and not on any personal knowledge of the circumstances of the schools or the School Teams. It is likely that there are factors, which were not known by the author of the report, to explain some of the findings and which are therefore not mentioned in this report.

Methodology

Views were collected through written responses to questionnaires, one for teachers and classroom assistants, the other for pupils. Both were designed by three people: the NSPCC's Education Adviser for Northern Ireland, the individual who was to conduct the qualitative evaluation, and a Senior Research Officer from the NSPCC. The questionnaires were piloted in schools with counselling services (outside Northern Ireland) and amended in minor ways as a result.

Following discussions with principals, questionnaires were sent to all teachers and classroom assistants in four secondary and six primary schools identified by the School Teams, and to pupils in the same four secondary schools. No attempt was made to obtain the views of primary school pupils because of the structural

differences between primary and secondary schools and the difficulty of devising a questionnaire adequate to span the age range.

Teachers and classroom assistants in three special schools where the School Teams were working were also invited to complete the questionnaires. Post-primary pupils at the special schools would be offered the opportunity to respond depending on the principals' judgement of the conceptual understanding of individuals and their ability to complete the questionnaire. These schools could support their pupils in the process. One school conducted staff discussions about the best way of achieving this in the least intrusive way and offered to share their approach with the two other special schools. However, the offer was not taken up. Schools where members of the School Teams had only recently started working were omitted from the survey.

Ideally, to ensure consistency in the information given to pupils and the conditions under which questionnaires were completed, one person would have overseen the distribution and completion of questionnaires, which principals agreed would be done during form periods or PSHE. In practice, this was not possible because of the large number of pupils involved and other practical constraints. However, each student was sent a letter that explained the purpose of the survey.

Questionnaires for teachers and classroom assistants were also sent to the principals for distribution. Each was accompanied by an envelope for returning the completed questionnaire, but in most cases questionnaires were returned in batches.

A coding frame was devised and a SPSS data file established to store and analyse responses.

QUESTIONNAIRE TO TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS

Respondents

Of the 13 schools represented, six were primaries, four were secondaries and three were special schools. Responses were received from 248 people of whom just over 90% were teachers and just under 10% classroom assistants. A little more than 50% of the teachers were from secondary schools, 29% from primary and 19% from special schools. 17% of classroom assistants were from special schools with 41.5% from primary schools and a similar percentage from secondary. Tables 1 - 3 summarize these details.

TABLE 1 RESPONSES BY TYPE OF SCHOOL

	Number of responses	Percentage
Primary	75	30.2
Secondary	127	51.2
Special	46	18.5
Total	248	100.0

TABLE 2 ROLES OF RESPONDENTS

	Number of responses	Percentage
Teachers	224	90.3
Classroom assistants	24	9.7
Total	248	100.0

TABLE 3 ROLES OF RESPONDENTS BY TYPE OF SCHOOL

	Teachers	Percentage	Classroom assistants	Percentage	Total
Primary	65	29.0	10	41.5	75
Secondary	117	52.0	10	41.5	127
Special	42	19.0	4	17.0	46
Total	224	100.0	24	100.0	248

Awareness of service

The overwhelming majority of respondents, regardless of the role and type of school in which they worked, were aware of the counselling service in their school. Only three respondents said they were unsure and six made no response to this question. One secondary school accounted for all three *unsures* and two of the non-responses.

TABLE 4 OVERALL AWARENESS OF THE SERVICE

	Numbers	Percentage
Yes	239	96.4
Unsure	3	1.2
No response	6	2.4
Total	248	100.0

Should such a service be available for the well being of school-aged children?

Very nearly all the 248 respondents thought that it should. Two were unsure and only one did not respond to this question.

Provision of this service by an external organization

Respondents answering positively to the previous question were asked to say whether they believed the service should be provided by an external organization. Again, almost all (242 of 248) thought it should. Of the remaining six, five made no response and one had mixed feelings.

Respondents were then asked to indicate whether this external organization should be the ELB, the NSPCC, or another external organization. They were invited to tick as many of these as they wished. Less than one third thought the ELB should provide such a service, 96% thought the NSPCC should and 11% that another organization should. In only one case did a respondent indicate that the service should be provided by another organization exclusively.

TABLE 5 PROVISION OF SERVICE BY AN EXTERNAL ORGANIZATION

	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Service should be provided by an external organization	242	97.6
Service should be provided by the ELB	75	30.2
Service should be provided by the NSPCC	239	96.4
Service should be provided by another organization	28	11.3

The few additional comments made in this part of the questionnaire referred to the importance of the organization responsible for the service having counsellors that were suitably qualified. A few also suggested training some school staff who would be able to fulfil the role.

Usefulness of the service in respondents' schools and the extent to which it fits the needs of the school

Almost all respondents (98.4%) indicated that the service was either *essential* or *important*. Of the remaining three respondents, two had *no opinion* and only one thought such a service was *not particularly useful*. Nearly 90% believed the NSPCC service fitted the needs of the school either *very well* or *reasonably well*. Of the remaining respondents 8.5% had *no opinion* and 1.6% thought the service met the needs of the school *not particularly well*. Tables 6 and 7 summarize these figures.

TABLE 6 USEFULNESS OF THE SERVICE

Usefulness of the NSPCC service	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Essential	116	46.8
Important	128	51.6
No opinion	3	1.2
Not particularly useful	1	0.4
Total	248	100.0

TABLE 7 EXTENT TO WHICH THE SERVICE MEETS THE NEEDS OF THE SCHOOL

Extent to which the service fits the needs of the school	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Very well	108	43.5
Reasonably well	114	46.0
No opinion	21	8.5
Not particularly well	4	1.6
No response	1	0.4
Total	248	100.0

Suggestions for improving the organization of the service

Eighty people responded to this question. Of the comments made by far the most, almost 15% of all responses, suggested that the service needed to operate for more hours per week. Other suggestions, made by a total of 20 respondents, included:

- ◇ Feedback by counsellors to teachers
- ◇ The employment of more counsellors
- ◇ The need to raise awareness about the service amongst pupils
- ◇ The establishment of a system of self-referral
- ◇ More funding.

Another 20 comments included:

- ◇ References to circumstances in a particular school, for example where visits by the counsellor had been erratic the previous year because of staffing problems
- ◇ Ignorance of how the service worked
- ◇ The need for the service to be able to respond more quickly to pupil need, for example by establishing alternative means of referral, such as a post-box for self-referral or a drop-in facility, or providing a counsellor on more days
- ◇ The importance of dedicated accommodation for the counsellor
- ◇ Opening times, such as after school, that would reduce the risk of embarrassment for pupils if they were seen by their peers to visit the counsellor
- ◇ The value of introducing group sessions and work in the classroom on issues such as bullying and friendship

- ◆ Training for teachers on how to deal more effectively with pupils experiencing problems.

Knowing how to access the service for children

The vast majority of staff (87%) said they knew how to access the service but a substantial minority (12%) were either unsure or did not know.

TABLE 8 KNOWING HOW TO ACCESS THE SERVICE FOR CHILDREN

Know how to access the service for a child who may need help	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Yes	216	87.1
No	12	4.8
Unsure	18	7.3
No response	2	0.8
Total	248	100.0

The benefits of a counselling service in school

Respondents were invited to answer in their own words. Comments were made by 194 people (78.2%). One further respondent felt it was too early to say what the benefits might be. The following benefits were identified. Some examples are included.

- ◆ An independent person

Someone other than the teacher to be a listening ear. Children sometimes find it easier to talk to someone divorced from the situation.

An extra person the pupils can consult for advice, support and help in a quiet environment - from a non-judgemental person who is not a member of the teaching staff.

Pupils [are] often loath to discuss personal problems with teachers who they see as performing a different role.

Provides a completely 'accepting' channel for the child to communicate through without the disciplinary overtones of the teaching role.

◆ **Confidentiality**

Pupils have the opportunity to talk to someone confidentially, someone they can trust, and someone who is not involved and won't judge them.

Pupils can avail themselves of the confidential service without the knowledge of their peers or the school staff.

◆ **A person with training and/or expertise**

Teachers, although they 'know' the children, do not necessarily have the expertise necessary or time within the classroom setting.

The main benefit is that experienced professional counsellors are better trained than teachers at dealing with the more serious issues.

Teachers generally feel inadequate in dealing with counselling aspects of education because of lack of training.

◆ **Someone with time to listen**

Support for the individual child - a person who has time to listen without interruptions.

Smaller problems may mask much larger problems, which teachers have no time to work through to.

◆ **Someone able to offer advice to staff**

*Teachers can be more aware of the problems children are having.
Enhances pastoral work of form teachers....*

◆ **Someone able to support parents**

This service can provide a place for children and other family members to talk about their anxieties, frustrations and anger....

◆ **Someone able to detect abuse**

Table 9 shows the figures for responses to this question.

TABLE 9 BENEFITS OF A COUNSELLING SERVICE IN SCHOOLS

Benefits	Numbers of respondents	Percentage of all respondents
Independent person	75	30.2
Confidentiality	28	11.3
Training/expertise	48	19.4
Time to listen	31	12.5
Advice to staff	8	3.2
Support for parents	6	2.4
Ability to detect abuse	2	0.8

Several comments also referred to the academic benefits, enabling teachers to concentrate on teaching and leaving pupils better able to learn.

Problems of having a counselling service in school

Ninety-one people (36.7%) responded to this question. One further respondent commented that it was too early to say. The responses were sometimes about the benefits of the service or qualified by comments that the problems referred to were only possibilities or were outweighed by the benefits of having the service.

None. If anything more support could be needed at times.

None. It is really worthwhile.

I do not see any problem. I have referred several pupils to the service and have found it beneficial.

Initially I had some concerns over adverse parental reactions. I am pleased to report that this has not been the case.

Pupils using the service are out of class - however any minor disruption caused by this is completely overshadowed by the benefits to the pupils concerned.

The main categories of response are listed below with the numbers of references in brackets:

- ◆ **Children abusing the system** (2) by making up stories (2), attempting to *get their own back* on staff (3), missing classes (19), and seeking attention (4).

Children can 'spin yarns' to NSPCC counsellors and there is no way of finding out what they said. Some 'difficult' children teachers would refer can be terrible 'liars'. If they are telling on others, they should have the right to reply.

There is a danger that a child could use the service to 'get their own back' on a teacher/classroom assistant and report an incident which is untrue and could have repercussions for the teacher/classroom assistant involved.

Sometimes pupils do not have a genuine reason to see the counsellor and are using it as an excuse to miss work.

- ◆ **A hostile reaction from parents** (9) if permission is sought for their child to see a counsellor or if the child makes an accusation of abuse.

The service itself is not a problem but reaching out to parents who really need support but refuse to give permission for counselling is sometimes a problem. They find the service intrusive, perhaps afraid of what the child will reveal.

Very few. Parents may feel marginalized in certain circumstances.

- ◆ **Difficulties relating to time**, because of the lack of counsellor time in school (5), because of timetabling and pressures of time in school (10) and because of insignificant problems competing with more serious ones (3).

Having the counselling service during school means that those children referred miss class lessons and often other children ask questions and the child referred may not wish the others to know where he/she was.

- ◆ **Communication between the counsellor, the principal and staff** (6) either for a teacher or classroom assistant to discuss a problem with the counsellor or for the counsellor to provide feedback.

Children are seen during class time and teachers are never made aware of what happens or is said during these sessions. As teachers trying to do our best for students should we not be informed?

- ◆ **The stigma attached to seeing the counsellor (19).** These comments referred to the fun sometimes made of children seeing the counsellor, the embarrassment of some children if others knew they were seeing the counsellor and the difficulties of having a system whereby it was not obvious to others that someone was seeing the counsellor.

Not totally confidential - other pupils do work out that a particular pupil is with the counsellor if, for example, it is on a Tuesday and they've suddenly disappeared.

And a classroom assistant commented: Other children may be aware of their peers visiting the counsellor, which may attract questions etc. Children may be reluctant to go because of the fact their peers may find out.

Involvement of the School Team in other activities

Respondents were asked to tick as many items in the list as they wished and were invited to add any other activity they thought appropriate. It should be noted that a number of responses indicated that the wording of the question was confusing to some respondents in that they were unfamiliar with the term *school team*.

Responses to this question are summarized in Table 10.

TABLE 10 INVOLVEMENT OF THE SCHOOL TEAM IN OTHER ACTIVITIES

Activities	Number of respondents thinking the School Team should be involved	Percentage of all respondents
One-to-one counselling	194	78.2
Running groups for pupils on specific issues	178	71.8
Curriculum input - e.g. PSHE	155	62.5
Supporting a peer support scheme	111	44.8
Supporting the establishment/maintenance of a School Council	56	22.6
Training/advice for staff on responding to children and young people	198	79.8
Training/advice for staff on child protection	184	74.2

Six other activities were suggested by four respondents:

- ◇ Involvement and communicating with parents
- ◇ Advice to staff on the use of reasonable restraint of violent/abusive pupils
- ◇ The establishment of post-16 groups
- ◇ Keeping staff up to date on new documentation and resources
- ◇ Refresher courses on child protection
- ◇ Advice and training on how to respond to problems children may approach staff with.

Other comments

Respondents were invited to add any other comments. Forty-eight (19.4%) chose to do so. Only one comment was adversely critical of the service, the respondent commenting on the lack of a *good back-up service* the previous year and complaining that certificates for peer counselling had not been forwarded to the school. Other comments, each made by one or two respondents, covered the following aspects of the service:

- ◇ The importance of giving the service and the counsellor time to become established in the life of the school
- ◇ The importance of continuity of staffing.

A few comments, each again made by one or two respondents, suggested improvements:

- ◇ Raising the profile of the service within the school by, for example, the counsellor working with particular year groups to develop pupils' confidence in her/him
- ◇ Involving form teachers more so that they dealt with minor issues while the counsellor could concentrate on the more serious ones
- ◇ Providing feedback to teachers and to parents¹

¹ *Feedback* could mean an exchange of information about particular pupils between counsellor and teacher following a referral but could also relate to more general issues arising from sessions with a counsellor that the school ought to know about. In the second case there would clearly be no problems about confidentiality. It was not always clear which type of feedback respondents had in mind.

◆ Providing more counsellor time in school.

Otherwise, 32 respondents made unreservedly complimentary remarks about the service.

The people who have worked from NSPCC in our school have done a fantastic job and work very hard. They have been totally committed to the well being of all the children.

In some schools the School Team's presence has been invaluable in recent years. The system is well established and most children know how to make use of it. Teachers can also refer children to an expert if worried about their general well being. It's a great support for staff and a wonderful service for children.

It is an excellent service which seems to be in greater demand as society/children's lives and experiences change. It provides essential support for teachers in addressing the needs of individuals in their care in the best possible way - emotional support/literacy in the child is key to their learning. I'm very glad the service is provided in our school.

I was involved on many occasions with pupils who had been to the counsellor or were being referred for various reasons. I felt it made a very big difference to them. I have always had a positive feedback.

It's an excellent idea to have a regular counsellor on site, not just at times of need. Children may need help at a time when we cannot predict.

I know of more than one pupil who has used the service and they do think it is excellent.

A very useful service indeed which meets the requirements of those pupils beyond the help of the school's own pastoral service or the parents. So far it has, in my view, proved extremely beneficial to those pupils who have made use of it.

SUMMARY OF THE RESPONSES OF TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS

- ◇ Almost all respondents were aware of the service in their school, believed that such a service should be available for school-aged children and that it should be provided by an external organization.
- ◇ Of the organizations that could provide a counselling service nearly all respondents thought it should be the NSPCC, although some believed that it could be the ELB or another charitable organization alongside.
- ◇ Almost all respondents thought the service was either *essential* or at least *important*, and nearly 90% that the service fitted the needs of the school at least *reasonably well*.
- ◇ Nearly a third of respondents suggested improvements: employment of the counsellors for more hours; the employment of more counsellors; feedback to teachers; raising awareness of the service amongst pupils; the establishment of a system of self-referral; and more funding for the service.
- ◇ Although most school staff knew how to access the service, a substantial minority (12%) did not.
- ◇ By far the biggest benefit of the service, mentioned by 30% of all respondents, was seen to be that it provided children with a person to talk to who was independent. Almost 20% referred to the training or expertise of the counsellors, and 12% to the advantage of having someone with the time to listen. Some respondents, in each case fewer than 5%, mentioned confidentiality, advice to staff, support for parents and the ability to detect abuse.
- ◇ Responding to a question about problems with the service, many school staff commented on the benefits or, if they did mention problems, referred to the benefits outweighing the problems. Specific concerns included the fear that some children may invent stories about their peers or school staff, and that some children may use the service to avoid lessons or to seek attention. Some were concerned that children were missing lessons regardless of their motives. Other problems mentioned were a potentially hostile reaction from parents; the service being one of many competing demands on the school day; insufficient time for counsellors and school staff to discuss problems and exchange information; the stigma some pupils attached to seeing a counsellor and comments sometimes made to those who did, particularly because it was often easy to tell when they were missing from certain lessons.

- ◆ In relation to the kinds of activities teachers and classroom assistants thought the School Teams should be involved in, around three quarters mentioned training and advice for staff on responding to children and young people; one-to-one counselling; training and advice for staff on child protection; and running groups for pupils on specific issues. Over 60% mentioned curriculum input, in PSHE for example, and 45% supporting a peer support scheme. A relatively small percentage, 23%, referred to the Team's potential role in setting up or maintaining a school council. These were activities identified in the wording of the questionnaire. Other items added by school staff were involvement and communicating with parents; advice to staff on the use of reasonable restraint of violent/abusive pupils; the establishment of post-16 groups; keeping staff up to date on new documentation and resources; and refresher courses on child protection.

QUESTIONNAIRE TO PUPILS

Reading the results

The results should be interpreted with some caution. Despite the request on the front of the questionnaire that respondents should not consult with anyone else, it was apparent that many young people did talk over the questions with other pupils and that, in some cases, there had been discussion with the teacher. This was clear from the number of occasions when batches of questionnaires revealed similar responses and/or similarly worded responses. Where there had been a discussion or pupils were aware that others would know how they had answered it is likely that this will have influenced their responses.

There is also inevitably some ambiguity in the wording of pupils' responses. Frequently they were not explicit. For example, *bullying* was mentioned by a majority of respondents as a topic that might be discussed with a counsellor. *Friends* were also often mentioned. In a rare explanation of *bullying*, one pupil wrote that it was *friends not telling you when they're going out*. It is clear from this and a few other comments that these are sometimes two sides of the same issue. There are many other examples. One would be the use of the word *stress*, usually without any explanation. Where there was it was usually in connection with getting *stressed* about homework or exams rather than a reference to a medical condition. In response to the question about whether pupils would see a counsellor if they had a problem, many said it would depend on the problem. However, this sometimes referred to the seriousness of the problem, sometimes to the nature of the problem but usually it was not possible to tell.

There were a few questionnaires where pupils were flippant or hostile but the vast majority appeared to have been completed seriously and thoughtfully.

Respondents

Responses were received from 1569 pupils between the ages of 11 and 18 at seven schools: three special and four mainstream secondary schools. More girls returned questionnaires than boys, 839 females to 722 males. Eight pupils did not indicate gender. Details of school year, school and gender are set out in Table 11.1 below.

TABLE 11.1 RESPONSES BY SCHOOL YEAR, SCHOOL AND GENDER

Year	School code	Male	Female	No response about gender	Total
8	D	8	5	0	13
	G	35	29	0	64
	H	3	3	0	6
	L	74	87	1	162
	Total	120	124	1	245
9	D	6	4	1	11
	F	21	24	0	45
	G	18	24	0	42
	H	2	0	0	2
	K	42	51	0	93
	L	63	65	0	128
	Total	152	168	1	321
10	D	8	5	0	13
	F	41	46	1	88
	G	31	30	0	61
	H	0	2	0	2
	K	42	56	0	98
	L	48	69	1	118
	Total	170	208	2	380
11	D	9	3	0	12
	F	24	29	1	54
	G	31	35	1	67
	H	2	1	0	3
	K	41	37	0	78
	L	48	80	2	130
	M	2	0	0	2
	Total	157	185	4	346
12	D	0	6	0	6
	F	9	10	0	19
	G	34	28	0	62
	K	36	37	0	73
	L	38	56	0	94
	Total	117	137	0	254
13	F	0	1	0	1
	Total	0	1	0	1
14	F	4	5	0	9
	L	1	11	0	12
	Total	5	16	0	21
n/r	F	1	0	0	1
	Total	1	0	0	1
Total		722	839	8	1569

Schools D, H and M are special schools. Schools F, G, K and L are mainstream secondary schools.

For the three special schools the total numbers of responses were 55 (school D), 13 (school H) and 2 (school M). It is not possible to say what percentage of secondary age pupils in each of the schools these figures represent as this information was not available. For the secondary schools the response rates per school are shown in table 11.2.

TABLE 11.2 SECONDARY SCHOOLS - RESPONSES BY SCHOOL AND YEAR GROUPS

School code	Number of responses	Potential responses	Percentage responses	Year groups responding
F	217	500	43.4	9-14
G	296	450	65.8	8-12
K	342	470	72.8	9-12
L	644	930	69.2	8-12, 14

Schools D, H and M are special schools. Schools F, G, K and L are mainstream secondary schools.

Response rates from the secondary schools ranged between 43.4% and 72.8%. It is also worth noting that responses were received from Year 8 pupils in only two of the four secondary schools, and very few completed questionnaires were returned by young people in Years 13 and 14. There were responses by Year 13 pupils in only one school (F - one pupil) and Year 14 pupils in two (F and L - 21 pupils).

Knowledge of school counselling service

Respondents were asked if they knew that there was a counselling service in their school. The vast majority did, 87% of respondents. However, a substantial minority, 12.7%, did not. The figures varied considerably from school to school, from year group to year group within the same schools and between boys and girls, as Tables 12.1 and 12.2 show.

TABLE 12.1 PUPILS WHO DID NOT KNOW THERE WAS A COUNSELLING SERVICE BY GENDER

School code	Boys	Boys %	Girls	Girls %	Total Including pupils not stating gender	% of respondents in school
D	5	16.1	2	8.7	8	14.5
F	8	8.0	0	0	8	3.7
G	22	14.8	12	8.2	34	11.5
H	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
K	27	16.8	14	7.7	41	12.0
L	62	22.8	44	12.0	108	16.8
M	0	0.0	*	*	0	0.0

* No respondents. Schools D, H and M are special schools. Schools F, G, K and L are mainstream secondary schools.

TABLE 12.2 PUPILS WHO DID NOT KNOW THERE WAS A COUNSELLING SERVICE BY SCHOOL AND YEAR GROUP

School code	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11	Y12	Y13	Y14	Total	% of respondents in school
D	3	5	0	0	0	*	*	8	14.5
F	*	1	3	4	0	0	0	8	3.7
G	20	1	4	5	4	*	*	34	11.5
H	0	0	0	0	*	*	*	0	0.0
K	*	8	8	7	18	*	*	41	12.0
L	23	35	4	27	16	*	3	108	16.8
M	*	*	*	0	*	*	*	0	0.0

* No respondents from this year group. Schools D, H and M are special schools. Schools F, G, K and L are mainstream secondary schools.

Usefulness of a counselling service in pupils' own school

Respondents were requested to answer this question regardless of whether or not they were aware of the counselling service in their school. All but seven pupils (99.6%) responded to the question. Taking all schools together, only 2.6% of all respondents thought that the service was *not at all useful*. The largest single percentage, 35.2% (n = 552), described it as *very useful*, followed by those who thought it was *useful*, 31.9% (n = 501). Having a counselling service was thought to be *extremely useful* by 20.7% (n = 325) of respondents and *a bit useful* by 9.1% (n = 143). The overwhelming majority (almost 88%) of respondents therefore thought that having a counselling service in their school was at least *useful*.

There was a clear gender difference in the responses to this question, as illustrated in Table 13.

TABLE 13 USEFULNESS OF HAVING A COUNSELLING SERVICE IN SCHOOL BY GENDER

Gender	Service <i>not at all useful</i> %	Service at least <i>useful</i> %
Male	4.4	83.7
Female	1.1	91.5

There was also some variation from one year group to another, though this was not statistically significant. The highest percentage (4.1%) of those who thought such a service was *not at all useful* was in Year 8, and the lowest in Year 9 at 1.6%. No one in Years 13 or 14 indicated that they thought the service was *not at all useful* but the numbers here were very small (22) in comparison with the other year

groups. Pupils in Year 9 were also the most positive about the usefulness of a counselling service, 92.5% indicating that the service was at least *useful*. The least positive were pupils in Year 10, at 84.7%. Other year groups ranged between 88.2% and 86.4%.

There was a marked difference in response from one school to another. It is difficult to gauge the significance of the figures for the three special schools (100% school M, 84.6% school H and 80% school D thinking a counselling service was at least *useful*) because the numbers are so small. The most positive responses were from schools G and L, with 92.2% and 90.5% of pupils thinking a counselling service was at least *useful*. The figures for the other two secondary schools, F and K, are respectively 83.4% and 81.3%.

No one from the special schools H and M thought a counselling service *not at all useful*, though 7.3% of pupils from school D thought this. In the mainstream secondary schools, the most positive responses were again from schools G and L, both at 1.4%, with school F at 3.2% and school K at 5%.

Whether the school should have a counselling service

Pupils were offered a choice of *yes* or *no*. The majority in favour was very large, with 94.3% (n = 1480) of respondents saying *yes* and only 4% (n = 62) *no*. A further four pupils (0.3%) wrote that they did not care and another 23 (1.5%) did not respond.

As with the previous question there was a significant difference in the responses of boys and girls, the percentage of boys saying *no* 7.5%, of girls 1%.

By year groups the most negative were pupils in Year 8 (7.3%), Year 12 (5.1%) and Year 11 (4.0%) and the most positive Year 9 (2.2%). The percentage in Year 10 who said *no* was only 2.6%. However, in this year group there were also the highest number who said they did not care (0.8%) and who made no response (2.1%). No one in Years 13 or 14 said *no*, but these years were represented by only 22 respondents in all.

By school, the most negative responses were from school D (21.8%). In the responses from the other two special schools no one said *no*, but it should be borne in mind again that these three schools combined totalled only 70 respondents, 55 of them from school D. The least number of negative responses came from schools L (2.3%) and G (2.4%). The other two secondary schools, F and K, had 4.6% and 5.3% respectively. To summarize, there were no significant differences by year group, but there were by gender and by school.

The advantages of a school counselling service

Pupils were invited to respond to this question in their own words. Because a later question gave respondents the opportunity to list specific topics that pupils may wish to discuss with a counsellor the responses to this question were coded as characteristics of a counselling service. Many of the respondents treated the question in this way. Although some wrote about specific topics such as bullying their answers were coded as characteristics. Respondents were able to list as many points as they chose. At least one advantage was identified by 86.1% (n = 1351) of respondents. Table 14 shows the details.

TABLE 14 ADVANTAGES OF A SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE

Advantages	Numbers of responses	Percentage* of responses
Discuss problems	462	29.5
Someone to talk to	392	24.9
Help address/resolve problems	299	19.1
Talk to someone other than family, friends, teachers	155	9.8
Confidentiality	141	8.9
Support	64	4.1
Get advice	33	2.2
No advantages	23	1.5
Proximity/familiar environment	14	0.9
Trained/experienced person	12	0.8
Trustworthy person	10	0.6
Help settle into school	2	0.1
Talk freely	2	0.1
Will help improve concentration/work	2	0.1
No cost to user	1	0.1
Someone who will understand	1	0.1
Other	46	3.0
No response	195	12.4

* The percentages do not add up to 100% because varying numbers of points were made by respondents.

Below are some examples of the comments made. Some inevitably cover two or three categories.

◆ Discuss problems

Yes because you can tell people your problem who listen and don't laugh.

◆ Someone to talk to

Yes it helps you with your problems if you can't talk to anyone else.

There will be someone older and more responsible to talk to.

If something has happened to a pupil they can go somewhere where people will believe them.

◆ **Help address/resolve problems**

Someone to talk to who will give an honest view. Someone who knows what you are going through and can help.

You can get something off your chest. You can talk to someone. They can help you get over it.

Yes because some pupils could have problems at home and then be cheeky in class. So the counselling could help them feel better and be better in class.

◆ **Talk to someone other than family, friends, teachers**

It's somewhere for the pupil to go, and talk in confidence, rather than telling a teacher/friend that wouldn't understand.

... if someone feels they can talk better to someone they don't know then a counsellor is good.

Yes, because people who have a problem may feel better talking to someone who won't judge or not listen to you.

◆ **Confidentiality**

People can get what they've bottled up out, and confidentially - knowing that no one can be told this.

... because I can talk to them about stuff I don't want anyone else to know, just me and whoever is listening.

◆ **Proximity/familiar environment**

You wouldn't feel as nervous talking to someone in your own school.

The category *Other* covers responses that gave insufficient information, such as *People may need counselling* as well as those that did not readily fall into the categories listed above. Comments included references to the benefits for individuals' well being, their safety, academic work and behaviour, to school counselling providing access to a service that would otherwise not be available to them, to helping the school and to dealing with the pressures of life today.

These are some of the responses:

If you were really upset and you went to the counselling you could feel better.

... because you can clear your mind after telling the person.

The advantages are you might feel more safe at school....

Yes, the pupils who are having counselling could work better in class.

Yes there is, helping the children to behave.

Many pupils wouldn't have any other access to help if this wasn't here as they wouldn't have the courage to ask anyone else for help.

To help relieve the headmaster and help the pupils.

Yes, because teenagers' lives are very stressful and many people these days are suicidal.

In all the positive categories, bar one, the proportion of girls identifying an advantage was higher than boys. The exception was *help address/solve problems* with 20.5% of the boys mentioning or implying this and 17.5% of girls. The situation was reversed in the negative categories as illustrated in Table 15.

TABLE 15 NEGATIVE VIEWS OF THE ADVANTAGES OF A SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE

Gender	No response		No advantages		Don't know	
	Number of pupils	%	Number of pupils	%	Number of pupils	%
Male	116	16.1	20	2.8	7	1.0
Female	76	9.1	3	0.4	2	0.2

The disadvantages of a school counselling service

This question was framed in exactly the same way as the one on advantages. At least one disadvantage was identified by 34.9% (n = 548) of respondents.

TABLE 16 DISADVANTAGES OF A SCHOOL COUNSELLING SERVICE

Disadvantages	Numbers of responses	Percentage* of responses
No disadvantages/ not aware of any disadvantages	741	47.2
Others making fun	83	5.3
Embarrassing	65	4.1
Confidentiality	60	3.8
Others may find out/ makes me uncomfortable	59	3.7
Others bullying	50	3.2
Talking to a stranger	31	1.9
Don't know	31	2.0
Missing lessons	29	1.8
Pupils may not want to share their problems	26	1.8
Excuse to miss lessons	14	0.9
Teachers may find out	10	0.6
Pressure exerted on pupils to attend against their will	12	0.8
Abuse of counselling service	12	0.8
Can counsellor be trusted?	7	0.4
Service underused	7	0.4
Revenge	6	0.4
Consultations may be ineffective	7	0.4
Cost of the service	6	0.4
Parents may be angry	3	0.2
Missing lunch or break	2	0.1
Pupils may not want to speak about their problems to a counsellor of the opposite sex	2	0.1
Other	134	8.5
No response	280	17.8

* The percentages do not add up to 100% because varying numbers of points were made by respondents.

Below are some examples of the comments pupils made.

◆ **Confidentiality**

It was clear that some pupils were referring to others perhaps observing them visiting the counsellor, or finding out that they had, and others to the substance of the consultation. In the majority of cases it was not possible to tell which was intended.

It's not always confidential as teachers [are] sometimes... informed of the clients' serious situations.

*Yes if you don't want your parents to know, but if it's serious they **have** to get in contact with them.*

◆ **Revenge**

This was cited in relation to other pupils finding out about reports to the counsellor of bullying.

If the counsellor tells a teacher and a pupil might hear and start spreading rumours.

◆ **Others making fun**

Very many pupils were conscious of what others, both pupils and teachers, might think of them if it became known that they had seen the counsellor.

If anyone found out you could get teased. It might make your problems worse.

It's shameful having to go to it, people make fun.

◆ **Missing lessons**

The significance was not always clear but on the basis of some responses there were concerns about both the academic implications of seeing the counsellor during lessons and about the obviousness to others of where they had gone or were going.

◆ **Talking to a stranger**

This is the obverse of the *someone other than family, friends and teachers* in the *Advantages*, and many of those who wrote this referred to the discomfort they would feel at talking to someone they did not know about personal or family matters.

◆ **Others bullying**

Sometimes this referred to a more extreme reaction by others than *making fun* on finding out that someone had seen the counsellor. Sometimes it was more akin to *revenge* if a bully or bullies found out that someone had reported this to the counsellor. It was often not possible to tell from responses which meaning was intended.

... if someone was bullying you and you went to see the counselling you could get even more names called to you.

◆ **Others may find out/makes me uncomfortable**

This was clearly a major concern for many pupils, either because of the possible repercussions if they had discussed other pupils with the counsellor, or because peers or teachers would think they were *weird*, or because others may start asking questions about why they had seen the counsellor.

If someone sees you going to the counsellor they automatically think there is something majorly wrong.

I think that little rumours go around if a person is seen going to see a counsellor.

It is not so good because when you get out of class and come back there would be all the questions.

It is hard to go and see them if you don't want friends to know. It may be because of them that you have to go.

◆ **Teachers may find out**

You have to let teachers know where you are.

◆ **Cost of the service**

This related to the cost to the providers of the service.

◆ **Embarrassing**

It was clear from some responses that this could mean several things. For some it was the embarrassment of being seen by others to go to the counsellor; for some it was the embarrassment of talking to someone outside the circle of family or friends, or sometimes teachers, about personal or family matters; for some the perceived humiliation of asking for help. A number of pupils wrote that they would not know what to say. Some pupils wrote here or elsewhere in the questionnaire of the referral system and/or the system for letting pupils know about when they had an appointment making it very obvious to others that an individual was seeing the counsellor. Some wrote about the room used by the counsellor being in a very obvious place in the school.

You might feel stupid asking for help.

... there is one tiny [disadvantage]. The teachers might not know and ask you in front of the class and you would have to say or she might give you a detention for not answering her.

... some pupils might not be brave enough to use the service if they have problems.

It would be hard to get talking to the counsellor because you would be scared.

◆ **Can the counsellor be trusted?**

Where respondents gave an explanation this was related to whether the counsellor could be trusted not to reveal what had been discussed to pupils, teachers or parents.

If you do not want your mum and dad to come in she will call them.

◆ **Service underused**

Not many use it because they're too scared.

◆ **Abuse of the counselling service**

Where there was an explanation reference was made to issues such as false accusations about other pupils.

People might lie and get someone in trouble.

People would just go for a joke.

◆ **Pressure exerted on pupils to attend**

It was suggested by young people referring to this that pupils may find it difficult to say no to a consultation if a teacher made the referral.

You can be sent to them but sometimes you don't want to.

◆ **Other**

They may not take you seriously. They might not understand.

... the counsellor may feel like they are carrying everyone's burden.

Yes, cause you tell things you don't really want to like a secret. Written by a Year 11 boy who wrote that he had benefited from counselling.

That you always feel you have to tell them when really you just want it to go away.

Sometimes you can't tell them personal stuff that's happening at home.

Counselling can often turn people against each other.

Topics young people may wish to talk about with a counsellor

Pupils were asked to list as many items as they wished. Of all the respondents 76 (4.8%) did not answer this question and a further 14 (0.9%) said *don't know*. Again there were patterns of answers in some batches of questionnaires that appeared to result from discussions about the questionnaire with other pupils and/or their teachers.

The two most frequently mentioned topics by a long way were bullying (65.1% of all respondents, n = 1022) and issues relating to family and home (61.6%, n = 966). These were followed by school-related problems (33.8%, n = 530), difficulties concerning friends, friendships and peers (24.0%, n = 377), and concerns about smoking, drugs and alcohol (21.9%, n = 346). Following some way behind were what pupils described as general or personal problems (11.0%, n = 172).

There are difficulties in knowing exactly what respondents meant by some of these topics. In a few cases some explanation was given; in most there was none. To some, for example, bullying might mean being hit by peers or having their belongings stolen, to others it might mean friends making plans and not telling one of the people in their crowd. There is probably some overlap between categories. Using the same example, it is possible that some respondents will have classed being left out of friends' plans as bullying while others said this was a problem with friends.

Each of the remaining topics was mentioned by fewer than 10% of respondents. Bereavement was identified by 9.4% (n = 148), emotional health by 8.9% (n = 140), sexual matters by 6.9% (n = 107) and abuse by 5.1% (n = 80). It should be borne in mind that pupils were asked to list topics that young people may wish to talk about with a counsellor, not what they personally would like to talk about, though it was clear in some cases that pupils were referring to their own situations.

Next, and each identified by less than 5% of pupils, were problems outside school and the home (3.6%, n = 56), relationships (2.9%, n = 45), general health issues (2.8%, n = 44), fights and fighting (2.2%, n = 35), growing up (1.3%, n = 21), behaviour (1.1%, n = 17%), and money (1.0%, n = 16). Again, there is likely to be some overlap with other categories. Many of those identifying *relationships*, for example, did not specify whether they were referring to family or friends or boy/girlfriends or teachers or anyone else. Finally, there were the topics mentioned by less than 1% of respondents. These were life after school (0.8%, n = 13), rape (0.4%, n = 6), religion (0.1%, n = 2) and disability (0.1%, n = 1).

These figures are listed in Table 17.

TABLE 17 TOPICS THAT PUPILS THINK OTHERS MAY WANT TO DISCUSS WITH A COUNSELLOR

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage* of all pupils
Bullying	1022	65.1
Family/home	966	61.6
School	530	33.8
Friends/friendship/peers	377	24.0
Smoking, drugs & alcohol	346	21.9
General/personal problems	172	11.0
Bereavement	148	9.4
Emotional health	140	8.9
Sexual matters	101	6.4
Abuse	80	5.1
Problems outside school & home	56	3.6
Relationships	45	2.9
General health issues	44	2.8
Fights/fighting	35	2.2
Growing up	21	1.3
Behaviour	17	1.1
Money	16	1.0
Life after school	13	0.8
Rape	6	0.4
Religion	2	0.1
Disability	1	0.1
Don't know	14	0.9
No response	76	4.8

Within some of these categories it is possible to be more specific. Where this is the case, the details are given in Tables 17.1 - 17.10.

TABLE 17.1 BULLYING

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Bullying	1013	64.6
Sexual taunting/harassment	9	0.5

TABLE 17.2 FAMILY/HOME

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Family/home	932	59.4
Divorce/family break up	31	2.0
Domestic violence	3	0.2

TABLE 17.3 SCHOOL

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
School problems	256	16.3
School work including homework and exams	212	13.5
Teachers	59	3.8
School phobia	2	0.1
Journey to school	1	0.1

TABLE 17.4 FRIENDS/FRIENDSHIP/PEERS

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Friends/friendship	321	20.5
Peer pressure	56	3.5

TABLE 17.5 SMOKING, DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Drugs	153	9.7
Alcohol	118	7.4
Smoking	75	4.8

TABLE 17.6 EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Depression	35	2.2
Stress	35	2.2
Emotional and mental health	34	2.2
Self-harming	15	1.0
Self-esteem	8	0.5
Eating problems	5	0.3
Appearance	4	0.3
Suicide	2	0.1
Traumatic event	2	0.1

TABLE 17.7 SEXUAL MATTERS

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Boy/girlfriends	47	3.0
Sex	39	2.5
Pregnancy	13	0.8
Sexual health	1	0.1
Abortion	1	0.1

TABLE 17.8 PROBLEMS OUTSIDE SCHOOL AND HOME

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Problems outside school	28	1.8
Law breaking	11	0.7
Violence	7	0.4
Paramilitaries	4	0.3
Sectarianism	3	0.2
Community problems	2	0.1
Area individual lives in	1	0.1

TABLE 17.9 GENERAL HEALTH ISSUES

Topics	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
General health	25	1.6
Physical health	19	1.2

TABLE 7.10 LIFE AFTER SCHOOL

TOPICS	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Jobs	8	0.5
Life after school	5	0.3

Gender differences seem to be in proportion to the numbers of boys and girls who responded apart from greater proportional concern by boys about peer pressure, fighting and sex.

Whether respondents would see the school counsellor

Pupils were asked to indicate if they would see their school counsellor if they had a problem or wished to discuss something. Most (98.2%) answered the question. A similar number answered *no* as *yes*, both a little more than 21% of all respondents. However, the remaining 55% did not rule out seeing the counsellor, answering either *maybe* (35.4%) or *don't know* (19.7%). In all, therefore, 76.8% of respondents either would or might see the counsellor.

Pupils were then asked to explain the reasons for their answer. Inevitably, many of the issues that had emerged in responses to the less personal questions about the advantages and disadvantages of a school counselling service surfaced again here.

Tables 18.1 - 18.5 show the reasons pupils gave according to how they answered the first part of the question. Some examples of their comments are also given.

◆ **Pupils answering yes**

The number of pupils answering *yes* was 341, 21.7% of all respondents. Up to two reasons were recorded for each respondent answering *yes*.

TABLE 18.1 PUPILS' EXPLANATIONS OF WHY THEY WOULD SEE A COUNSELLOR

Reason for saying yes	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Help address/ resolve problems	110	7.0
Discuss problems	52	3.3
Someone to talk to	45	2.9
Confidentiality	28	1.7
Person other than family, friends, teachers	25	1.5
Support from counsellor	24	1.5
Advice from counsellor	10	0.6
Trustworthy	8	0.5
Professional	5	0.3
Talk freely	3	0.2
Someone who will understand	2	0.1
Other	18	1.2
No response	35	2.2

Because I have been to the school counsellor and she helped me a lot to understand things.

I would go to the school counsellor if I had a problem because then I wouldn't be angry inside all the time.

[Having mentioned child abuse and bullying and being frightened of someone for no reason] *Because I won't suffer by myself. I would speak if I could.*

Because [it] makes you feel a lot better.

Because she might make you understand more to the situation.

I would because people say that it is very useful.

I can talk better to someone I don't know than I do know without getting upset.

It's better to talk to someone than bottle it up inside as I have experienced.

Yes I would to get it out of your mind.

Yes, I have got bullied by one girl and when I told the counsellor she stopped it altogether.

Yes, because she/he will take it seriously.

Yes, because I think that it helped me when I was getting counselled. I would go again.

I feel it is the best person to talk to as they give you advice which won't be biased.

I have been to see the counsellor and I found it very beneficial.

◆ **Pupils answering no**

The number of pupils answering *no* was 336, 21.4% of all respondents. Up to two reasons were recorded for each respondent answering *no*.

TABLE 18.2 PUPILS' EXPLANATIONS OF WHY THEY WOULD NOT SEE A COUNSELLOR

Reason for saying <i>no</i>	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Talk to someone I know instead or at first	71	4.5
Wouldn't want to talk to a stranger	45	2.9
Don't like talking about personal things / keep problems to myself	37	2.4
Am too shy / would feel uncomfortable /embarrassed	34	2.2
Sort out problems myself	23	1.5
Concerned about confidentiality	16	1.0
It's my business, not the counsellor's	10	0.6
Not sure if I could trust the counsellor	9	0.6
Counselling may be / would be ineffective	6	0.4
Would be embarrassing if others found out	4	0.3
I don't have problems or problems that are serious enough	4	0.3
Others might make fun of me if they found out	3	0.2
Would be a waste of time	2	0.1
Others may pick on / take revenge on me	2	0.1
Don't know	1	0.1
Other	22	1.4
No response	47	3.0

Sometimes they can't do nothing about it and it takes school time.

I think my private information would be the daily gossip.

If you tell them something very serious they will have to tell the principal.

[Having mentioned bullying as a topic for discussion] I wouldn't go because if you tell the principal he could get it sorted out quicker.

... because I don't know where it is.

... because I don't smoke or take drugs or get bullied.

... I wouldn't like to be a tout if I was being bullied.

... cause they are too nosy.

... cause I don't like to make a fuss over me.

Because I have no confidence to talk to someone I don't know.

They only make it worse.

◆ Pupils answering *maybe*

The number of pupils answering *maybe* was 550, 35.4% of all respondents. One reason was recorded for each respondent answering *maybe*. This was the single largest group on this question. Naturally enough, these were respondents who recognized that there might be a value to counselling but had reservations about it or whether it was suitable for them. Most respondents chose to explain their choice of answer to this question by focusing on the reasons why they would hesitate to see a counsellor. Their reasons are listed in the first table that follows. A few chose to give the reasons why they would see a counsellor. These are listed in the second table.

TABLE 18.3 PUPILS' EXPLANATIONS OF WHY THEY WOULD *MAYBE* SEE A COUNSELLOR - NEGATIVE REASONS

Reason for saying <i>maybe</i>	Number of pupils	Percentage of all pupils
Depends on the problem	142	9.1
Am too shy / would feel uncomfortable /embarrassed	85	5.4
Talk to someone I know instead or at first	71	4.5
Wouldn't want to talk to a stranger	35	2.2
Don't like talking about personal things / keep problems to myself	25	1.6
May be able to sort out problem myself	18	1.1
Others might make fun of me if they found out	16	1.0
Concerned about confidentiality	10	0.6
Uncertain what will happen	9	0.6
Would be embarrassing if others found out	7	0.4
Not sure if I could trust the counsellor	7	0.4
I don't have problems or problems that are serious enough	3	0.2
Others may pick on / take revenge on me	2	0.1
Not sure if it would be beneficial	2	0.1
Problems if parents found out	1	0.1
Other	34	2.2
No response	72	4.6

TABLE 18.4 PUPILS' EXPLANATIONS OF WHY THEY WOULD *MAYBE* SEE A COUNSELLOR - POSITIVE REASONS

Reason for saying <i>maybe</i>	Number of pupils	% of all pupils
Someone to talk to	5	0.3
Person other than family, friends, teachers	4	0.3
Some benefit from seeing counsellor	2	0.1
Speak freely	1	0.1
Confidentiality	1	0.1
Professional	1	0.1
Discuss problems	1	0.1

I have answered this because I would be shy to go and have friends I can talk to anyway.

It would depend what it was about. If it was about my family then I wouldn't.

I would probably think it through with myself first and then think whether it would be serious enough to see a counsellor about.

I don't really know if I could be open and talk personally to someone I didn't know.

I would like to talk to someone about something but I would be very shy about talking to a stranger.

Sometimes you don't know what way people you don't know will take you, but if the counsellor was supportive and friendly and not make you feel stupid about your problems then I would go no problem.

I would really like to see a counsellor if I had a problem, but I wouldn't really know how to arrange to see one.

Because I would be too embarrassed cos if someone saw me they would think I was mental.

Because I wouldn't know what to say and people would ask questions.

I would be scared it might not be a big thing to worry about.

There may be embarrassing things you can only tell your friends.

I probably wouldn't cause people will find out. I would rather talk to someone I know like my form teacher.

Because I haven't went to one before and wouldn't know what to do.

Well I don't even know who the counsellor is!

◆ Pupils answering *don't know*

The number of pupils answering *don't know* was 309, 19.7% of all respondents.

TABLE 18.5 PUPILS' EXPLANATIONS OF WHY THEY *DON'T KNOW* IF THEY WOULD SEE A COUNSELLOR

Reason for saying <i>don't know</i>	Number of pupils	% of all pupils
Depends on the problem	62	3.9
Sort out problems myself	6	0.4
Talk to someone I know instead or at first	32	2.0
Concerned about confidentiality	9	0.6
Wouldn't want to talk to a stranger	27	1.7
Not sure if I could trust the counsellor	6	0.4
Am too shy / would feel uncomfortable /embarrassed	40	2.5
Others might make fun of me if they found out	7	0.4
Don't like talking about personal things / keep problems to myself	16	1.0
Would be embarrassing if others found out	8	0.5
Counselling may be / would be ineffective	3	0.2
I don't have problems or problems that are serious enough	10	0.6
Problems if parents found out	2	0.1
Depends on sex of counsellor	1	0.1
Other	16	1.0
No response	64	4.1

I don't like to tell many people my personal business. I normally bottle things up.

I circled don't know because I would be afraid of getting teased but I would like to get the problem sorted out, I also wouldn't like to talk to a total stranger.

Cause we don't really know the school counsellor as well as our form teacher so you may want to speak to someone you know or knows you.

I could maybe sort it out for myself.

There may be some things that you done and you don't know how to explain.

I don't know because I am older and ignore problems at home and don't let things get on top of me - but if they did I would definitely see a counsellor.

I'm not sure if I would because it would take a lot of courage to talk to a complete stranger.

It might be too personal to talk to someone about.

Improvements to the counselling service

A quarter of respondents indicated that they thought the service could be improved.

TABLE 19 NUMBERS OF PUPILS THINKING IMPROVEMENTS COULD BE MADE TO THE SERVICE

Responses	Number of pupils	% of all pupils
Yes	403	25.7
No	1042	66.4
Don't know	37	2.4
No response	87	5.6

Ways in which the counselling service might be improved

Respondents who said that the service could be improved were invited to explain how. Up to two reasons were recorded for each respondent.

TABLE 20 SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

Suggested improvements	Number of pupils	% of all pupils
Raise awareness	116	7.4
Increase counsellors' time in school	95	6.1
Maintain confidentiality	49	3.2
Employ more counsellors	31	2.0
Offer appointments out of school hours	16	1.0
Provide a dedicated/ more suitable/ comfortable room	14	0.9
Employ counsellors of both sexes	10	0.6
Offer alternative ways of accessing counsellor	4	0.3
Set up group sessions	2	0.1
Don't know	1	0.1
Make clients feel comfortable	1	0.1
Other	81	5.1
No response	37	2.4

◆ Raise awareness

Comments were made on ensuring that all pupils are aware that a service exists, and know how and where to access it. Suggestions were made about how this might be done through assemblies, visits by the counsellor to class, individual sessions with all pupils, posters and a web-site, and how these might be used to explain issues such as confidentiality.

It should be more noticed and easier to be able to make an appointment. Reassurance that it will be kept private.

Have an open day in front of the whole school in the assembly hall, to give a brief outline of how it works....

It should be made aware of more. I don't think enough people know.

I think pupils need to be maybe asked to come and asked to take the first step.

Don't know where it is.

Introduce themselves more. Go round the classes and say who they are and where they are going to be, cause last year I didn't even know there was a counsellor.

They could come around and chat to people... get to know the pupils. To tell you the truth I have never seen the counsellor before.

By putting up notice boards and what time you can visit the counsellor. It would be very useful.

They can tell more students about the [counsellor] and put up posters to show that it is good to talk to someone about your problems.

Personally I don't know where the counselling takes place, how you go about seeing the counsellor or what days/times the counsellor is in school.

Talk to the students in assembly about it e.g. confidentiality.

They could have a website.

Let the counsellor have an individual chat with every pupil in the school.

◆ Confidentiality and related issues

Concerns about confidentiality permeated many of pupils' responses, not just those coded under *Maintain confidentiality*. As with many responses on other topics, pupils were often not explicit about what they meant by terms such as *confidentiality*.

It was clear from those who were that for some it meant ensuring that their peers, and sometimes their teachers, did not find out that they were seeing a counsellor. They were anxious about what this might say about the state of their mental or emotional health or because it might result in fun being made of them or name-calling or more extreme bullying. Many comments reflected a concern that it was unlikely that confidentiality in this sense could be maintained. Pupils mentioned factors such as the location and nature of the room used by the counsellor and referral and appointments systems that drew attention to a pupil's involvement with the counsellor, by for example having to miss a lesson.

Confidentiality also related to the extent to which any conversations between pupils and the counsellor would remain private. Some seemed aware that certain *serious* issues would be passed on to staff or parents but it was not clear what they thought these were. What did seem clear was that there was much uncertainty and

anxiety that if a pupil spoke to a counsellor this could be problematic. There was also reference to conversations between counsellors and teachers that might be overheard by other pupils.

I think it would be a good idea if there was a box to put a note in and she could get back to us instead of telling teachers.

More notification, set times for people or years to save them from embarrassment of having to ask for it.

... sending notes or letters to know he/she is there.

A better room with more privacy. Pupils can look in and see you, and some people don't want others to know that they have been.

A counsellor's number (talk over phone).

You would be able to stay after school and every now and again you were given the chance to go (as a class) one by one so it's not suspicious.

The counsellor could be available for a short period of time after school so that your friends wouldn't know you are going.

I do not think people just want to walk up to the counsellor and say they want to chat. They should be allowed to write to them in some simple way, like post it through the office of the counsellor.

If you were allowed to go between classes so that your friends would not know.

Your teacher should not know that you're with the counsellor because God knows what they must think if they did know.

How are you supposed to see a counsellor in school when you have lessons? You would have to tell the teacher and you would feel embarrassed or stupid.

Numbers of pupils having used the counselling service

Respondents were reminded that they did not have to answer this question.

However, most chose to: 94% (n = 1474). The details are presented in Tables 21.1 and 21.2 below.

TABLE 21.1 NUMBERS OF PUPILS INDICATING THEY HAD SEEN A SCHOOL COUNSELLOR

Seen school counsellor	Number of pupils	% of all pupils
Yes	188	12.0
No	1286	82.0
No response	95	6.0

TABLE 21.2 PUPILS INDICATING THEY HAD SEEN A SCHOOL COUNSELLOR BY SCHOOL AND GENDER

School code	Number of boys yes	% of boys in school yes	Number of girls yes	% of girls in school yes	Total pupils yes	% of respondents from school yes
D	5	9.1	11	20.0	16	29.1
F	22	10.1	35	16.1	57	26.2
G	9	3.0	20	6.8	29	9.8
H	7	53.8	6	46.2	13	100.0
K	12	3.5	19	5.6	31	9.1
L	16	2.5	24	3.7	40	6.2
M	2	100.0	0	0.0	2	100.0
Total		% of all male respondents		% of all female respondents		
	73	10.1	115	13.7	188	

Schools D, H and M are special schools. Schools F, G, K and L are mainstream secondary schools.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE TO PUPILS

Methodology

One advantage of a written questionnaire is that it can collect the views of a large number of people. A disadvantage is that it does not allow for clarification of responses, particularly to open-ended questions. As discussed in the Introduction and elsewhere in the report it is often not clear precisely what respondents meant by, for example, *bullying* or *friends* or *confidentiality* and it may well be that two people using different terms meant the same thing or that two people using the same term meant different things.

Another advantage is that there ought to be consistency in that all respondents are receiving the questions framed in the same way. However, in this study, there appears to have been considerable variation in how the questionnaire was presented to pupils. While it is apparent that teachers and peers influenced the responses of some individuals it is not possible to assess the extent to which this was so or in which ways.

It is also not possible to tell how representative the respondents were of the views of pupils in their schools. For example, 839 females responded compared with 722 males. It is unlikely that this reflects accurately the proportions in the schools. Similarly, the coverage of different year groups was uneven. Only in Year 11 was there some representation from all seven schools. In Year 8, pupils from only four schools were represented and from two of these the numbers were very small, 19 in all. Years 13 and 14 were barely represented at all: one pupil from Year 13 and 21 from two schools in Year 14. And from school to school response rates varied widely, in the four secondary schools from 43% to 73%. From the special schools it has not been possible to calculate the response rates at all.

In designing any future evaluation it would be worth keeping these factors in mind.

Despite the caution with which the results should be read, overall there was a sizeable response, 1569 pupils between 11 and 18, which does give an indication of the views of pupils in the seven schools (four secondary and three special) involved.

Knowing about the service

The percentage of pupils knowing of the existence of the counselling service in their school, 87%, is impressive. However, it also means that almost 13% did not know. It would be worth the counselling services looking at three aspects of the figures to see where further publicity may usefully be directed and how.

- ◇ In almost all the schools considerably more boys than girls were unaware of the service.
- ◇ There was substantial variation between schools. The percentages not knowing about the service in the four mainstream schools ranged from 3.7% to 16.8%.
- ◇ There was some variation from one year group to another, although this was not consistent. In one school, however, the numbers not knowing about the service in Year 8 was considerably higher than in any other year group.

In the section of the questionnaire where pupils were invited to give their suggestions about how the service might be improved, raising awareness was at the top of the list. Here pupils referred not simply to ensuring that pupils know the service exists but to where and how and when to access it. Their suggestions included the means by which this might be done: assemblies, visits by the counsellor to classes, one-to-one sessions with all pupils, posters, open days and notice boards. Pupils also added suggestions about raising awareness of issues, such as confidentiality, that may additionally be barriers to the use of the service.

Using the service

Just over 75% of the pupils indicated that they either would or might see a counsellor. Twenty-one per cent ruled it out altogether. Almost 88% of respondents thought that having a counselling service in school was at least *useful*. However, here again there was a marked difference between boys and girls. For example, almost 4.5% of the boys thought such a service *not at all useful*, compared with just over 1% of the girls. Similarly, when it came to opinions about whether their own school should have a counselling service 94% of respondents said yes. However, 7.5% of the boys said no compared with 1% of the girls. There are likely to be all

kinds of reasons for the differences, including the possibility that boys are less attracted to the idea of counselling, and the influence of peers where questionnaires were not completed in confidence. It may be that to ensure pupils of both sexes at least consider the counselling service in their school as an option if they are troubled by a problem, some of the negative assumptions need to be challenged.

Such assumptions, or at least suspicions, appeared in the responses of many pupils, regardless of their attitude to the idea of having a counselling service. Some of these feelings were to do with the nature of the relationship between counsellor and client, some with the structure of the service.

The concerns about the relationship were largely to do with confidentiality. As mentioned in the section on methodology above, terminology is sometimes problematic. Where pupils explained their concerns they wrote about a range of contexts related to confidentiality and their discomfort in light of them. These included: their peers knowing or finding out that they were seeing a counsellor, peers making fun of them, the possible repercussions of discussing bullying if the perpetrators found out, teachers knowing and making assumptions about their mental state, and embarrassment and anxiety about what teachers might think of them. There seemed often to be uncertainty about the boundaries of confidentiality. While some were clearly aware that there were occasions when a counsellor would have to inform others of what had been discussed many seemed unsure of what the circumstances would be for information to be shared with parents or teachers.

Some pupils were also unsure about the extent to which they would be able to trust a counsellor to be discreet. Mention was made, for example, in the section on the disadvantages of a counselling service, of concerns about other pupils overhearing a counsellor feeding back information to a teacher. For some, reservations about using the service were related to talking to a stranger. Some wrote of the courage needed to talk to a counsellor and the fear of not knowing what to say.

These concerns suggest that more, or ongoing, work needs to be done to make explicit to pupils the relationship between counsellor and client, particularly in terms of confidentiality.

The concerns about structural aspects of the service were also often linked to this theme. Four were particularly evident: the referral system, the appointments system, the location of the room used for counselling and the characteristics of the room. Some pupils wished to be able to contact the counsellor directly, by note or by phone. Some felt that if appointments were made to coincide with lesson times it was obvious to both peers and teachers that an individual was seeing the counsellor. Some thought that the situation would be easier if the counsellor offered sessions at alternative times, such as after normal school hours. Some would prefer to be informed directly of appointment times rather than via a teacher. Pupils were also aware of the likelihood of others finding out about visits to the counsellor if the room used by the counsellor was in particular parts of the school or the room itself lacked privacy, for example because others could see in.

Given constraints such as the times at which counsellors can be available across a number of schools, and accommodation in schools which is often at a premium it seems unlikely that all the concerns could be addressed. However, it may allay the inhibitions of some pupils if the concerns were discussed explicitly when the service is being publicized.

It goes without saying that counselling will not be seen as an option by all pupils and it would probably not be possible to meet demand if it were. It was clear as well that many pupils recognized that there were degrees of problem and that some could be resolved without external help. However, the reasons pupils gave for not considering seeing the counsellor at all, or only as a last resort, if they had a problem seemed to be of two distinct types. The first were those that suggested a level of confidence on the part of the pupils who gave them that they already had sufficient support in their lives if they needed it. Some of these pupils wrote that if they had a problem there were other people in their lives to whom they would speak rather than a counsellor: parents, other members of the family, friends or teachers. Some preferred to sort problems out for themselves. The second were those who seemed defensive, or suspicious or lacking in confidence. Some saw talking to a counsellor as an invasion of privacy or wrote of not wanting

to talk to a stranger or were unsure about whether they could trust a counsellor to keep what was discussed confidential. Some wrote of being the kind of people who kept problems to themselves or of being too embarrassed to speak to a counsellor or of needing courage to do so, or of being afraid that they would not know what to say. Again, addressing the issues raised by the second group when publicizing the service to groups of pupils may help to allay these fears.