

Cutting Waiting Times for Mental Health Services Using Counsellors and Psychotherapists

Why are waiting times for mental health support a problem?

Mental health waiting times in the UK are unacceptably long. Nearly a quarter of adults wait over 12 weeks for their first NHS therapy session, and many face "hidden waits"—an initial assessment followed by months before treatment begins. As of late 2022, over 110,000 people were waiting more than 18 weeks. These delays don't just frustrate patients; they worsen mental health conditions, increase risks

of self-harm, and lead to more complex, costly interventions. For the NHS, long waits create bottlenecks, overburdening GPs, emergency services, and mental health teams. The consequences are worsening patient outcomes, overwhelmed services, and escalating costs for those that need support as well as broader society.

How can counsellors and psychotherapists help reduce waiting times?

Accredited counsellors and psychotherapists are a professional workforce that are already trained, experienced, and available to offer a wide range of therapeutic services. Allowing patients to access them directly – without waiting for GP referrals – could significantly cut waiting times. Data suggests that with this approach, the average wait could drop to

just 1–2 weeks. This isn't just about speed, however; it's also about quality and accessibility. Counsellors and psychotherapists are skilled at providing evidence-based interventions that improve mental health outcomes, reduce reliance on emergency services, and prevent problems from escalating.

Doesn't this approach cost more?

No. In fact, it could save money. Self-employed counsellors and psychotherapists are cost-effective compared to on-roll staff. By adopting a pay-per-service model, the NHS wouldn't need to shoulder the costs of employing, training, or managing additional staff. Timely access to therapy also means fewer

crises, fewer emergency department visits, and fewer inpatient stays, all of which reduce overall costs. Investing in accredited counsellors and psychotherapists upfront is smarter spending that benefits patients and saves resources in the long run.

How do we implement this solution?

This approach isn't about replacing existing services – it's about enhancing them, or modifying them. It's about recognising the untapped potential in our mental health workforce and using it to meet the growing demand for support.

- **Direct Access Policies:** Introduce policies allowing patients to access accredited counsellors & psychotherapists directly, bypassing GP referrals where appropriate. Expand the Right to Choose.
- **Integration with NHS Services:** Embed counsellors & psychotherapists into NHS multidisciplinary teams, ensuring they are a core part of holistic mental health care pathways.
- **Flexible Funding Models:** Explore options like Personal Wellbeing Budgets to give patients the financial flexibility to choose accredited therapists without additional NHS red tape.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Educate the public on how to find and access accredited counsellors and psychotherapists quickly and safely.



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