



Scottish Funding Council  
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

# Additional Counsellor Funding: Outcomes and Impact 2022-23



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## Additional Counsellor Funding: Outcomes and Impact 2022-23

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**Issue Date:** 8 January 2025

**Summary:** This report provides an evaluation of the outcomes and impact of the Programme for Government commitment to deliver funding for an additional 80 counsellors in the tertiary sector between AY 2019-20 and AY 2022-23. Student and institutional testimonies have been redacted from this report to protect the identities of individual students and/or institutions.

**FAO:** The Scottish Government, Scotland's colleges and universities, and the general public.

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# Additional Counsellor Funding: Outcomes and Impact 2022-23

## Executive Summary

1. In the 2018 Programme for Government (PfG), the Scottish Government committed to “providing more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over the next four years”, with an investment of around £20 million. The available AY 2022-23 data indicate at least 59.91 (FTE) additional counsellors being provided since AY 2018-19. At its peak in AY 2021-22, the PfG funding resulted in an additional 89 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) counsellors either directly employed by institutions or contracted through external and online services.
2. For AY 2022-23, the final year of the four-year PfG commitment, at least 19,940 students accessed counsellors directly employed by the institution. This is 4,931 more students than reported in the AY 2018-19 baseline data.
3. Institutions were largely grateful for the additional PfG funding and the improvement it had on mental health support for students. They reported that the funding has aided the retention, attainment and wellbeing of students accessing the service and has resulted in improved life chances for a significant number of students. However, evidence provided throughout this report suggests the demand for mental health support is steadily increasing and many institutions, particularly colleges, will not be able to continue to support the same level of counselling provision supported by the PfG commitment if no further funding is allocated.
4. Student feedback on the PfG commitment was generally positive, however, some students expressed concerns about waiting lists for support as well as disappointment with the number of sessions provided by counselling services.
5. Institutions are awaiting the publication of the Scottish Government’s Student Mental Health Action Plan which is anticipated in Spring 2024. Institutions hope that this plan will detail further Scottish Government support for transitioning out of the PfG commitment for additional counselling provision.

## Background

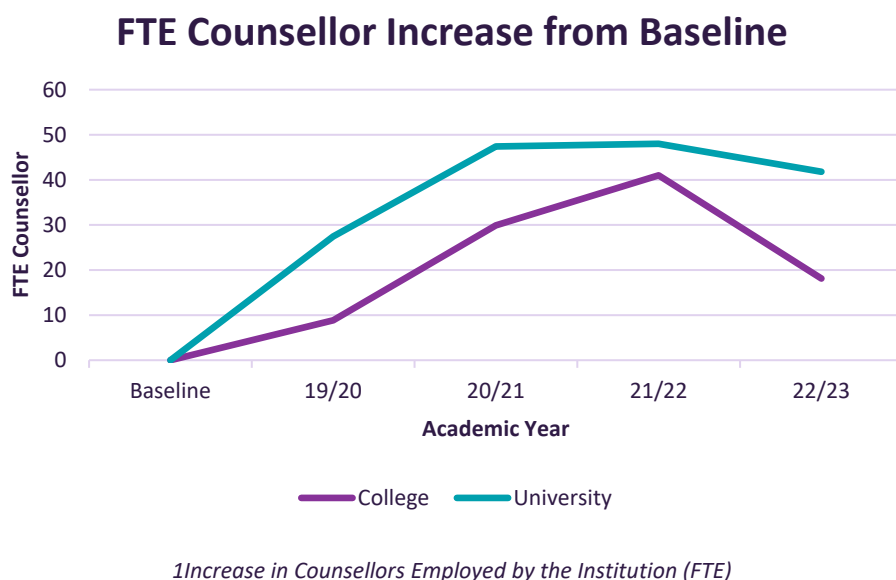
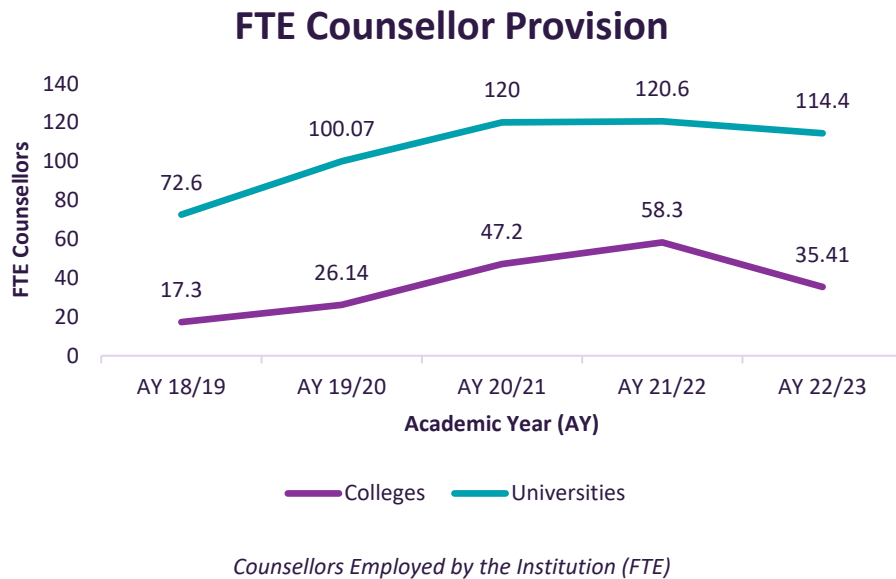
6. In the 2018 Programme for Government (PfG), the Scottish Government committed to “providing more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over the next four years”, with an investment of around £20 million. The Scottish Government asked SFC to monitor the impact of this assessment through a baseline survey.
7. Prior to this funding being awarded, institutions completed a survey to enable SFC to set a baseline from which growth could be measured. The most recent survey, the Mental Health Counsellor Evaluation Survey, provides data for Academic Year (AY) 2022-23 to measure growth against the baseline, gather feedback on the Scottish Government PfG commitment, and includes insight into how institutions plan to transition to a more sustainable approach to student mental health and wellbeing.
8. The PfG commitment funding was awarded in AYs 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23, totaling £15.749m across the university and college sectors.
9. Progress in the recruitment of counsellors in the sectors has been made throughout the commitment with a slight dip in the final year of the PfG funding. The available AY 2022-23 data indicate at least 59.91 (FTE) additional counsellors being provided since AY 2018-19. This includes 41.8 (FTE) additional counsellors directly employed by institutions within the university sector, and 18.11 (FTE) in the college sector. At its peak in AY 2021-22, the funding resulted in an additional 89 FTE counsellors either directly employed by institutions or contracted through external and online services.
10. It is important to note the final data set is incomplete, with one institution not reporting. In total, 34 institutions responded. UHI has been considered as one institution for the sake of reporting purposes.

## Purpose

11. In order to help assess the impact of this additional counselling provision, this paper outlines the outcomes and impact from this investment to date, based on data and reporting in the AY 2022-23 Mental Health Counsellor Evaluation Survey. These outcomes and impact include:
  - Provision of counsellors.
  - Demand and waiting lists.
  - Student feedback.
  - Transition out of the Programme for Government Commitment.
  - Rounding up the Scottish Government Commitment.

## Provision of counsellors

12. The aim of the [PfG commitment](#) was to provide ‘more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over the next four years’. This commitment was met during the reporting cycle of AY 21-22, seeing a total increase of 89 FTE counsellors compared to the baseline data. However, it has not been maintained, with the increase in FTE counsellors falling to 59.91 FTE by the final year of commitment, AY 2022-23. The table below shows total FTE counsellor provision over the reporting period.



	AY 18-19 Baseline	AY 19-20	AY 20-21	AY 21-22	AY 22-23
<b>Colleges*</b>	17.3	26.14	47.2	58.3	35.41
<b>Universities</b>	72.6	100.07	120	120.6	114.4
<b>Total FTE</b>	89.9	126.21	167.2	178.9	149.81
<b>Total FTE Increase from Baseline</b>	N/A	36.31	77.3	89	59.91
<i>Total increase by sector - college</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>8.84</i>	<i>29.90</i>	<i>41.00</i>	<i>18.11</i>
<i>Total increase by sector - university</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>27.47</i>	<i>47.40</i>	<i>48.00</i>	<i>41.80</i>

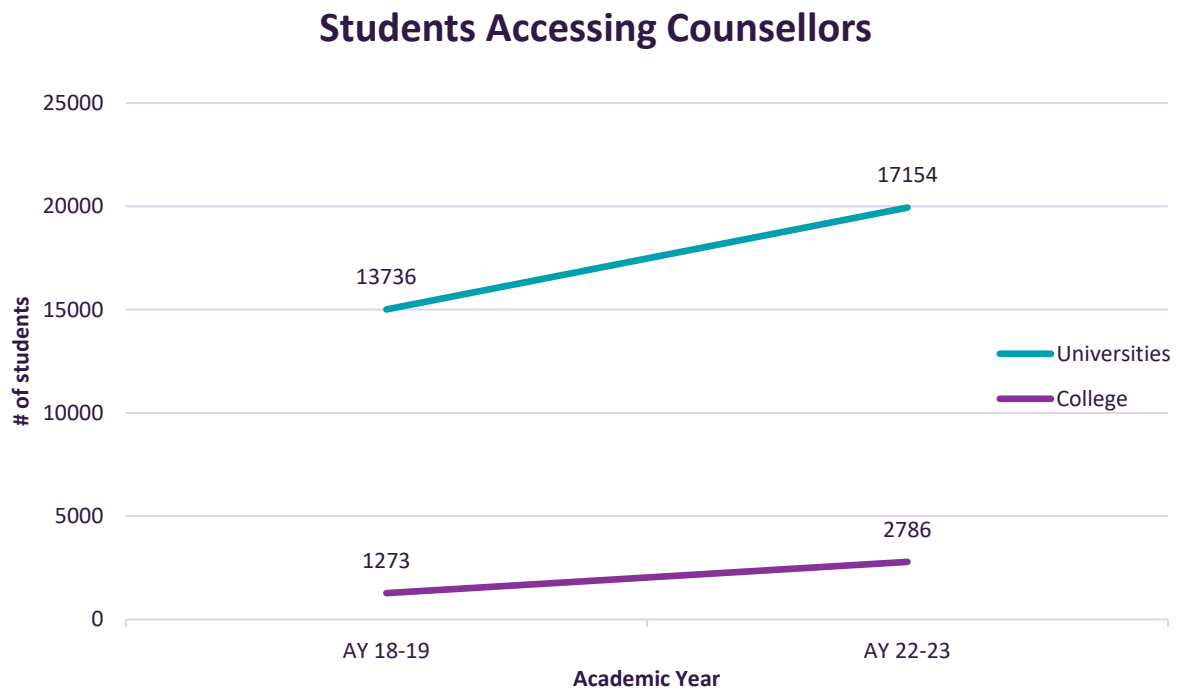
\*For the purpose of these calculations, UHI and SRUC data have been considered under the college section. This reflects the SG allocations for this funding. UHI's campuses have been grouped as one institution throughout the report.

13. It is important to note that some institutions, mainly colleges, opted to provide external counselling support to students throughout the PfG commitment. This external resource was not calculated as a contribution to the FTE data above and therefore the data shown above underestimates the mental health counselling support that was made available to students using this funding.
14. As AY 2022-23 was the final year of the PfG commitment, it is likely that institutions began to transition out of the additional funding provided for counsellors, resulting in a decrease in the overall provision compared to the previously reporting cycle.
15. Some institutions reported that the annual funding model made it more difficult for them to plan effectively. It may also be that timing of the allocation and the split of funding over the financial and academic years also contributed to difficult financial planning. The table available in Annex A demonstrates when each year of the PfG commitment funding was announced to institutions.
16. Several institutions, including both colleges and universities, had other mental health and wellbeing support on offer to students throughout the PfG commitment funded out with the ringfenced funds. This included support delivered through roles such as Wellbeing Advisors, Mental Health Advisors or Nurses, Student Advisors, Wellbeing Officers, Student Support Tutors, etc.
17. Most institutions also worked with other institutions, local NHS services, local councils and third sector organisations to support student mental health and wellbeing

throughout the PfG commitment. This included working with organisations such as NUS Scotland, Think Positive, College Development Network, Emily Test, Police Scotland, Social Work, Student Minds, etc.

## Demand and Waiting Lists

18. For AY 2022-23 at least 19,940 students accessed counsellors directly employed by the institution. This is 4,931 more students than reported in the AY 2018-19 baseline data.



19. Out of 34 respondents, 27 institutions had waiting lists for counselling provision.
20. Compared to the AY 2018-19 baseline data, the total number of students on waiting lists increased by 102 students for colleges and decreased by 630 students for universities.
21. Compared to AY 2018-19 baseline data, average waiting times have been reduced by 9.5 (college) and 11.6 (university) working days. The maximum waiting times have also been reduced by 14.7 (colleges) and 12.7 (university) working days.



## College Waiting Time

	Total number of Students on Waiting List	Average Waiting Time (Working Days)	Average Maximum Waiting Time (Working Days)
Baseline (AY 2018-19)	219	21	38
AY 2022-23	321	11.5	23.3

## University Waiting Time

	Total number of Students on Waiting List	Average Waiting Time (Working Days)	Average Maximum Waiting Time (Working Days)
Baseline (AY 2018-19)	1833	20	45
AY 2022-23	1203	8.4	32.3

22. Most universities and colleges reported an increase in the number of students presenting with a higher complexity of mental health conditions including anxiety, panic disorders, and suicidal thoughts. Some institutions have indicated that they believe this is due to the continuing impact on mental health of COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. Colleges have also highlighted an increase in students presenting with challenges around neurodiversity and gender identity.
23. Institutions explained that their counselling services have often 'filled a gap' in other services. They reported that local support organisations have limited availability and capacity. There have also been instances reported of international students experiencing challenges in registering with their local GP, which has resulted in these students relying solely on institutional counselling services for mental health support.
24. In order to meet rising demand, some institutions have begun using external resources such as The Talking Rooms, Togetherall, and NUS Think Positive. Some of these resources come at a fee to the institution. Some institutions referred to their Student Mental Health Agreement, in partnership with their Students' Association and NUS Think Positive as being a helpful way to keep on top of increasing mental health demand.
25. Although some of the external resources mentioned in paragraph 25 provide students with virtual support, a handful of institutions highlighted that students preferred

face-to-face counselling sessions. This has increased demand for their face-to-face appointments.

## Student Feedback

26. Student feedback was mostly positive, highlighting how the counselling services have provided them with crucial support and coping strategies to improve their mental health and wellbeing going forward. Other positive feedback from students included:
  - The positive impact counselling has had on their studies as well as their personal life. Some students noted that if they had not been able to access the counselling services they would have withdrawn from their course.
  - Their institution's counselling services signposted them to further support they did not know existed. This included further internal institutional support as well as external support. Students found this extremely helpful.
27. However, some students provided less positive feedback on the number of sessions that were offered. The number of sessions differed between institutions. Most institutions' standard offer of counselling included six to eight sessions. The minimum number of sessions offered by institutions was four and the maximum number of sessions offered was 12.
28. Students expressed disappointment about the number of sessions they were offered and claimed the number of sessions was not enough to provide them with the support they required. The thought of reaching the maximum number of sessions increased anxiety levels among some students. Students acknowledged there were often waiting lists so even if they felt they needed further counselling sessions, they didn't want to take away from another student's opportunity to receive the service.
29. Some students expressed an interest in seeing more diversity in counsellors available to them. This included diversity in faith backgrounds and having more specialised support from counsellors who understood their lived experience of protected characteristics.

## Transition out of the Programme for Government Commitment

30. The four-year PfG commitment for additional counsellor funding came to a close in July 2023. In September 2023, the Scottish Government announced the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Fund for colleges and universities for AY 2023-24. This was a one-off fund with the aim of providing financial support for a transition from the PfG commitment to a more sustainable approach to student mental health and wellbeing support. This funding was allocated by the Scottish Government through SFC. Within the [guidance for this fund](#), institutions were told they could also use their final allocation of the PfG commitment funding towards transitioning out of the commitment.
31. In the Mental Health Counsellors Evaluation Survey, institutions were asked to provide

insight on how much, if any, of their final allocation of the PfG commitment fund was spent towards transitioning out of the commitment and what this would be used for.

32. Many institutions were already using external support resources such as The Talking Rooms, Spectrum Life, Togetherall, Think Positive and other local support organisations and reported using part of the final allocation of the PfG counsellor funding towards continuing to pay for these resources.
33. Many institutions were using some of the counsellor funding and the transition fund to develop and deliver both in-house and external mental health and wellbeing training for staff members. Some institutions also used the funding for resilience training for students. A few institutions reported that going forward from the PfG commitment, they will be focusing on building student resilience as a preventative intervention for student mental health.
34. Some institutions have used the PfG counsellor funding or transition funding to support staff roles such as Wellbeing Advisors or Mental Health Support roles that will focus on signposting students to external support. Some of these roles include having a focus on students who are refugees, seeking asylum, veterans and those from armed forces families.
35. A few institutions acknowledged the link between physical health and mental health and plan to use some of the final allocation and transition fund to support projects that will help improve the physical health of students.

## Rounding up

36. In the evaluation survey, institutions were asked to provide any additional information on their experience with the PfG commitment funding provided by the Scottish Government for Counsellors between AY 2019-20 and AY 2022-23.
37. Most institutions highlighted how the annual funding model presented some challenges for long-term planning and led to the use of short-term contracts and the associated uncertainty for the counsellors they employed. It was reported that some counsellors left their institutional roles to secure permanent employment elsewhere and the institutions expressed that this may have been mitigated if the funding had been planned further in advance.
38. Institutions acknowledged there is growing pressure on the NHS that has resulted in students seeking mental health support from their institutions to access services more quickly. A number of institutions reported that some students were told by NHS staff that they should enroll in college to receive quicker access to mental health support. Institutions highlighted the 'blurring of lines' between what mental health conditions could be supported by the institutions and what should be treated by the NHS. Institutions would welcome support in improving links with the NHS and enhancing referral pathways.

39. Many respondents reported that the PfG commitment has raised student and staff expectations for mental health support at college and university. For the institutions who are unable to provide the same level of services after the close of the commitment, they reported concerns about the need to realign students' expectations of support with what can realistically be achieved.
40. Institutions reported that the additional funding has aided the retention, attainment and wellbeing of those students accessing the service and has resulted in improved life chances and opportunities for a significant number of students. Institutions expressed concerns for students who will not have access to the same service after the close of the PfG commitment and claimed that in some instances this could be a risk to life.
41. Institutions expressed some frustration that the PfG commitment funding could only be used for counsellors and were clear that any future funding for student mental health would benefit from being more flexible.
42. An institution highlighted the PfG funding would have been useful to support the work towards the National Equality Outcomes (NEOs) as two of the NEOs relate to students who declare a mental health condition or students who need reasonable adjustments. The institution felt this could have been done if the PfG funding had been more inclusive of all wellbeing and mental health provision, rather than focusing solely on counsellor provision.
43. Institutions highlighted the need for further understanding of the degree to which institutional counselling services should be managing those with complex and enduring mental health needs and at what point these needs should be treated by the NHS. Institutions expressed better access to NHS treatment for young adults and clear referral pathways from college/university services into NHS primary care are needed.
44. Many institutions expressed disappointment that the Scottish Government Student Mental Health Action Plan had not yet been published at the time the transition funding was distributed.

## SFC Reflections

45. The PfG commitment to provide the sector with funding to obtain more than 80 additional counsellors was met within the timeframe of the commitment. However, it was not maintained: the latest figures for the final year of the PfG commitment show a dip down to just over 59.91 FTE additional counsellors. This figure is likely to drop further in subsequent years, particularly in the college sector, assuming no additional funding is provided to institutions to support the same level of counselling provision obtained throughout the PfG commitment.
46. Student feedback on the support provided by the PfG commitment was mostly positive but some felt it was limited by the number of counselling sessions offered to students. Students also outlined that waiting lists were still in place and some students were

concerned about other students who were waiting for support.

47. It is important to note that waiting list data can change every day and does not tell a consistent story. An increase to a waiting list could indicate that more students are aware of the support available to them or they feel more comfortable seeking support. Similarly, a reduced waiting list could potentially mean students are unaware of support or do not feel comfortable seeking support.
48. Institutions are using their final allocation of the PfG commitment funding, and their Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Transition Fund provided by the Scottish Government, to transition, where possible, to more affordable longer-term options covering a wider remit of mental health and wellbeing support. Institutions are awaiting further clarity about the future of student mental health support and are anticipating further guidance through the publication of the Scottish Government's Student Mental Health Action Plan, although we note that this will not be accompanied by funding to support the development and implementation of the plans.
49. The survey results, including feedback on the use of the final allocations of the PfG commitment funding and the transition fund, show a continuously increasing demand and need for mental health support; a rise in the numbers of students presenting with more complex mental health needs; and limited support for mental health needs locally.

## Annex A

PfG Commitment	Date of SFC funding allocation	SG funding allocation	Funding methodology assumption on the number of counsellors supported	Additional counsellors delivered	Comments
AY 2019-20	<a href="#">1 November 2019</a>	£3.645m	42.33 college 38.65 university	36.94 FTE	<p>The announcement was not in place for the start of the AY so the 80 counsellors could not be delivered that AY</p> <p>A baseline survey was released to capture information on AY 2018-19 from which growth would be measured</p>
AY 2020-21	<a href="#">22 September 2020</a>	£3.645m	42.33 college 38.65 university	77.3 FTE	<p>The allocations said that a baseline survey would be released in October.</p> <p>The baseline survey was not released due to the Pandemic. Instead, a series of engagement calls took place between SFC and institutions to record counselling provision and other updates.</p>
AY 2021-22	<a href="#">16 July 2021</a>	£4.229m	46.4 colleges 34.57 university	89 FTE	<p>This year was the first time the PfG commitment was met. It should also be noted that it had the highest allocation of the four-year commitment, and the allocations were confirmed and published before the start of the AY giving</p>

PfG Commitment	Date of SFC funding allocation	SG funding allocation	Funding methodology assumption on the number of counsellors supported	Additional counsellors delivered	Comments
					<p>institutions certainty and assisting their planning</p> <p>A baseline survey relating to AY 2020-21 was released with the allocations</p>
AY 2022-23	<p><a href="#">1 Jan 2023</a> (only up to March)</p> <p><a href="#">14 June 2023</a> (remaining AY funds released)</p>	<p>£2.025m</p> <p>£2.205m</p>	<p>20.03 college 18.72 university</p> <p>Counsellor assumption numbers not provided by SG but outlined it equated it was in line with AY 2021-22 funding</p>	57.1 FTE	<p>There was significant disruption to the timing of the confirmation of the allocation in the final year of this commitment (even although the actual funding provided was equal to AY 2021-22 levels):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The confirmation of the funding was not provided or released until six months into the AY.</li> <li>• The funding was only confirmed up to March</li> <li>• The remaining allocation to make up the AY was not confirmed until 1 month prior to the end of the AY</li> <li>• The final baseline survey took form as the 'Mental Health Counsellors Evaluation Survey'. This was issued in November 2023.</li> </ul>