



The Importance of Human Connection and the Impact of Digitalisation on Counselling Training and Practice

CPCAB Report December 2024



NATIONAL
COUNSELLING &
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SOCIETY

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Executive Summary Key Findings

This report is based on an industry-wide qualitative survey conducted by the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB) and in collaboration with The National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society (NCPS) and Counselling Tutor to gather insights from a broad audience of counselling and psychotherapy professionals, learners, and tutors, as well as the results from a YouGov survey commissioned by NCPS.

Importance of Human Connection: 98% of respondents to our industry-wide survey believe that human connection is vital for counselling training, as it fosters empathy, trust, and non-verbal communication, which are essential for building effective therapeutic relationships. 80% of respondents to our YouGov survey would prefer to work with a human for their mental health support.

Concerns About Distance Learning: 89% of respondents expressed concerns about distance learning, feeling that it does not adequately prepare practitioners to develop the human connection and emotional depth required for counselling.

Views on Face-to-Face Training: 92% of respondents preferred in-person or synchronous online training methods, highlighting the value of non verbal cues, emotional attunement, and real-time interactions, which they believe are essential for preparing future counsellors.

Blended Learning: A blended approach combining synchronous online and in-person training was favoured by respondents who believe this approach balances flexibility with the need for human connection in practical skills development.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Digital Tools: Only 12% of people in the UK would consider mental health support from a Chatbot, according to our YouGov survey. Many of the respondents from our industry survey expressed uncertainty or scepticism about the integration of AI and digital tools in counselling practice. While acknowledging their growing role, respondents emphasised that technology cannot replace the emotional and relational aspects central to effective therapy.

Introduction

The counselling and psychotherapy landscape has experienced significant shifts due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent acceleration of digitalisation across the field. This has led to increases in both synchronous online (face to face) and asynchronous online (distance learning) and the digitalisation of counselling services.

Distance learning, or any training that lacks sufficient synchronous learning, does not meet the required professional standards and, therefore, does not qualify practitioners for entry onto professional registers. This situation compromises the integrity of the counselling profession, as it allows practitioners to operate without sufficient experiential learning and without the safeguards and accountability that come with professional membership. Consequently, clients seeking support from these practitioners are not afforded the protection provided by the professional associations. As a result, CPCAB and NCPS believe there is a pressing need to re-

evaluate the effectiveness and quality of counselling training methods and therapeutic practices to ensure they continue to deliver safe and effective outcomes. In the wider landscape, the explosion of tools through Large Language Model (LLM) generative AI has seen a number of people turn to mental health Chatbots as a form of therapy. We also wanted to understand how the public sees counselling and psychotherapy and how they view AI as a potential avenue for therapeutic support.

As part of their joint Campaign, 'Therapeutic Relationships: The Human Connection', Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB) and The National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society (NCPS) have conducted two independent surveys. (See Appendix 1 & 2 for survey questions.) CPCAB is an awarding organisation that provides qualifications in counselling and related fields, focusing on maintaining high standards and preparing practitioners to deliver safe and effective therapeutic services (see Appendix 3). NCPS is a professional membership organisation that supports and advocates for counsellors and psychotherapists, aiming to enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health services (see Appendix 4). Together, CPCAB and NCPS strive to address the evolving needs of the counselling profession, particularly in the context of the increasing digitalisation of counselling and training.

Based on an industry-wide survey with 607 respondents and research via YouGov with a total representative sample size of 2,059 adults, this report reinforces our belief that human connection is a critical component of effective counselling and counselling training. The data collected provides valuable insights into how digitalisation is perceived by counselling and psychotherapy trainees and professionals, as well as members of the public, in terms of training efficacy and professional practice, and reveals both opportunities and concerns. The report highlights perceptions of the role of human connection in counselling and training. It also aims to assess whether counselling training has been and continues to be fit for purpose and to explore the potential correlation between client safety, therapeutic outcomes, distance learning, and the digitalisation of mental health services.

Methodology

This report is based on an industry-wide qualitative survey conducted by CPCAB and in collaboration with NCPS and Counselling Tutor to gather insights from a broad audience of counselling and psychotherapy professionals, learners, and tutors, as well as the results from a YouGov survey commissioned by NCPS as part of the joint campaign. The industry survey was distributed to CPCAB centres, including tutors and learners, as well as to NCPS members and the Counselling Tutor community, which comprises professionals and learners in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. The survey consisted of a range of rated and open-ended questions designed to explore attitudes toward the role of human connection, counselling training methods and the impact of digitalisation, including the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools in counselling and training (see Appendix 1). Respondents were encouraged to share their personal experiences and professional perspectives. Data from the survey was analysed internally by CPCAB, using thematic analysis to identify key trends and insights. Responses were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to human connection, experiential learning and the potential challenges and opportunities posed by digitalisation in counselling and training. This analysis was conducted to ensure that this report accurately reflects the views of professionals and learners from diverse training backgrounds and professional experience level.

In line with CPCAB's commitment to transparency in its research methodology, some survey questions were intentionally designed to explore whether professionals agree or disagree with our core belief regarding the significance of human connection in counselling training and practice and to assess the degree of alignment between industry professionals and CPCAB's position. Whilst the survey data does not provide specific correlations between those who have qualified versus those still in training or how long respondents have been in practice, it is implied that individuals with more experience in face-to-face training tend to place a higher value on human connection. As the digitalisation of counselling training has seen an increase in recent times, this suggests that a longer time in the profession influences these views. This report from the survey responses, therefore, acknowledges the following potential biases:

- **Professional Bias:** Respondents, all professionals in the counselling field, may inherently value in-person interactions more due to their own experiences and personal and professional backgrounds.
- **Experience-Based Preference:** The insights shared by respondents are deeply rooted in their own experiences with in-person training. Their responses might overemphasise the significance of face-to-face interactions because they have seen first hand the benefits of such training methods.
- **Selection Bias:** The sample of respondents is self-selected from the counselling profession, which might not fully represent perspectives from individuals outside his field or those with less experience in counselling.

The YouGov survey commissioned by NCPS had a total sample size of 2,059 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 13th and 14th of May 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). Data from the YouGov survey was analysed internally by NCPS, again using thematic analysis. A complete breakdown of the findings can be found here.

All figures, unless otherwise indicated, are from the industry-wide survey. Where results have come from the research via YouGov, they will be indicated as such.

The Importance of Human Connection

Human Connection in Counselling and Psychotherapy Training

The question posed to respondents was: **“Do you believe that human connection within counselling training is vital to prepare someone to offer real human connection in their future counselling work?”**

A significant majority of respondents of the survey (92%) received their training through fully in-person or synchronous online mediums, with only 2% trained by distance learning. Of these, 75% felt prepared to offer a safe therapeutic relationship, although 27% believed this was only somewhat achieved in training. Concerns about distance learning were significant, with 89% of respondents stating that it does not adequately prepare practitioners. An overwhelming 98% of respondents emphasised that human connection is vital in counselling training and did not believe that distance learning prepares practitioners adequately, emphasising the need for live tutor and peer feedback. Respondents repeatedly highlighted the importance of face-to-face interactions for developing the skills and personal growth necessary for effective therapeutic work. Many noted that real-life human connection, particularly in a training context, simply cannot be replicated by technology and emphasised that fundamental aspects of counselling, such as empathy, trust, and non-verbal communication, are more effectively developed in a face-to-face or in-person setting. Respondents believe that this face-to-face environment fosters stronger therapeutic relationships. As one respondent shared, **“the space created between the counsellor and client also adds to the dynamic of the therapeutic relationship,”** reinforcing the notion that these interactions can be difficult to replicate in virtual settings. Another noted, **“There is no hiding place face to face and no barriers,”** emphasising the transparency and authenticity of in-person engagement.

Face to Face Interactions

Face-to-face interactions in training were overwhelmingly favoured by respondents, who cited non-verbal communication, body language and emotional attunement as the key benefits. One respondent remarked, **“Silence is much easier to read face-to-face,”** pointing out the limitations of virtual settings in capturing the full spectrum of communication and active listening. In addition, many respondents highlighted the value of being in the same room as others, which allows them to read non-verbal cues, experience the energy of the interaction, and confront challenging emotions in

real-time. One respondent captured this idea, stating, ***“The subtlety and complexity of relating to someone, moment to moment, eye to eye, with all the bodily senses fully engaged – is something we can’t replace with technology.”*** This reflects the view that human connection is an embodied experience, not something that can be fully conveyed through digital technologies. Face-to-face interaction, either in-person or online in counselling training is seen as irreplaceable by many respondents. Respondents comments included: ***“Human connection can only be achieved through practice. There is no substitute for face-to-face, no matter how hard I try.”***

Experiential Learning

Respondents emphasised that human connection is not just a part of counselling; it is a critical learning tool in itself. Being able to connect with peers and tutors during training allows counsellors to practice empathy, navigate relational challenges, and refine their skills in real-world scenarios. One respondent highlighted this, stating, ***“Counselling is about connection, communication, and building a relationship. To fully train without the opportunity to practice those things is not full training.”*** Another added, ***“There’s nothing that can substitute for the real-life dynamic of a therapeutic relationship.”*** The consensus of respondents is clear: human connection, experienced face-to-face, plays a vital role in the development of skilled, empathic, and effective counsellors. One of the key themes that surfaced in the survey was the importance of practising counselling skills in real-life settings, emphasising that theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient. Practical skills sessions help trainees build confidence, competence, and emotional maturity, which are all necessary for providing effective counselling services. One respondent said, ***“The practice skills sessions I have experienced so far have been so vital in providing me with the experience, confidence, and competence required.”*** The shared learning environment, whether with peers or tutors, was seen as instrumental for confidence building in the responses received. As one respondent preparing for a counselling placement shared, ***“Confidence and experience is gained from practice, therefore it follows that face-to-face training and learning under the guidance of a tutor is needed.”*** In addition, many respondents highlighted the necessity of face-to-face interactions for developing core competencies such as empathy, active listening, and trust-building. These skills, they argue, are best cultivated through direct human connection. One respondent encapsulated this by stating, ***“You need to feel the presence of another person to connect psychologically and be able to form a trusting bond.”*** Many respondents agreed that experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, providing the context needed to apply learned concepts in real-life counselling scenarios and learning experiences. As one respondent put it, ***“You can read all the theory you want, but until you are in the presence of another, you cannot tell how you will feel or how you will respond to their emotions.”***

Self-Awareness and Vulnerability

One of the most commonly discussed themes in the responses was the role of face-to-face training in fostering self-awareness, which is seen as an essential component of effective counselling. Several respondents indicated that face-to-face training

promotes more authentic personal growth, encouraging trainees to confront their own emotional challenges and triggers. One respondent shared, ***“In the same room, I have had to confront all my own issues to be able to sit with someone’s need, week after week.”*** This type of experience, they explained, is vital for becoming a well-rounded and empathic counsellor. Another respondent reflected this sentiment, saying, ***“Surely a well-rounded counsellor is what the client deserves,”*** suggesting that personal development is essential for delivering high-quality therapy. Respondents also pointed out that face-to-face training offers opportunities to work with vulnerability and better understand personal reactions in a group setting. This emotional exposure is crucial for building the emotional intelligence necessary to be an effective counsellor. One respondent described the experience as ***“Counselling training can be quite raw and vulnerable, and I think it is important to feel this as a group and note how and why you react to certain dynamics.”*** Another mentioned, ***“It’s about being heard. A bot cannot provide this unique help.”***

Diversity Awareness

Several respondents stress the importance of human connection in fostering diversity awareness. They argue that face-to-face experiences provide a richer opportunity to confront challenges, personal triggers, and biases, which are vital for the personal growth of a counsellor. Respondents believe that working through these challenges in the presence of peers and tutors leads to a deeper understanding of human behaviour, which is essential in developing a well-rounded therapist. One respondent articulated this by saying, ***“How can a therapist be entirely prepared without having gone through a variety of experiences via training?”***

In summary, the emphasis on diversity awareness in counselling training highlights the need for courses to actively incorporate inclusive practices that allow learners to confront their own biases, triggers, and personal challenges by ensuring that diverse perspectives and experiences are represented in both the content and structure of the course. This can include the integration of case studies that reflect a wide range of cultural, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as opportunities for learners to work with clients and peers from diverse populations. By adapting training to be more inclusive, institutions can ensure that their programs are relevant to a broader audience and that counselling services are relevant to a wider range of clients.

Empathy and the Relational Model

The survey responses highlight that the relationship between tutor and student is essential in training effective counsellors. Face-to-face interactions allow tutors to model relational human connection, offering learners real-time examples of empathy, trust, and effective communication. Respondents also value the immediacy of face-to-face feedback from both tutors and peers, which plays a significant role in their personal and professional growth. As one respondent explained, ***“It helps to work on yourself and enables you to recognise challenges and triggers.”*** Many respondents emphasised the relational nature of counselling and the importance of practising

these skills during training. Learners are expected to develop self-awareness, navigate boundaries, and understand the dynamics of therapeutic relationships in real-time. Direct, embodied experiences with peers and tutors are considered essential. One respondent expressed, **“The human connection forms the base from which trust develops, and a therapeutic relationship can be formed.”** Another added, **“How can you offer something you haven’t experienced in training?!”** Face-to-face training was regarded by many as crucial for gaining a full understanding of human relationships. The subtle nuances of face-to-face communication, such as eye contact, body language, and non-verbal cues, were seen as irreplaceable in fostering the deep relational skills required in counselling.

Summary: Analysis of Human Connection in Counselling and Psychotherapy Training

Survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed on the critical role of human connection in counselling training, with 98% emphasising its importance. The majority (92%) were trained through in-person or synchronous online formats, and 89% expressed concerns that distance learning does not adequately prepare practitioners for real-world therapeutic relationships. Face-to-face interactions were favoured for fostering essential counselling skills like empathy, trust, and non-verbal communication. Respondents noted that the depth of connection necessary for effective therapy could not be fully replicated in some online mediums, particularly those with no live interaction with tutors and peers, stressing the importance of real-time feedback from tutors and peers. Many highlighted the value of experiential learning, where practical sessions help build confidence and competence. Additionally, respondents discussed the role of face-to-face training in fostering self-awareness and managing vulnerability, which is vital for personal growth and developing emotional intelligence. This training environment also enhances diversity awareness, allowing counsellors to confront biases and deepen their understanding of human behaviour. In conclusion, the relational model incorporating direct human connection is seen as irreplaceable in producing skilled and empathic counsellors.

Counselling Training Methods

The most common method of training, selected by 69% of respondents, was fully in-person delivery at a college or university. The second most popular option, chosen by 21% of respondents, was a blended model, a combination of in-person and synchronous online sessions. A smaller group of 6% of respondents indicated that their training incorporated a combination of all methods (in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous online (distance learning)). Only 3% of respondents indicated they were trained fully synchronously online to date. The least common form of training, with just 1% of respondents, was asynchronous online (distance learning). This data suggests that, while there is some openness to online components in training, there remains a strong emphasis on in-person and face-to-face interaction, reflecting the human-centred nature of the profession.

Synchronous Online Training

Synchronous online training was praised for its accessibility and flexibility, which many respondents appreciated, particularly during the pandemic. As one respondent put it, **“I believe it was great for me to do one of the courses online and one in person, as both prepared me for the real world in which you might also end up having online therapy sessions.”** This shows how synchronous online training can equip future counsellors to work in online therapy, which has become more common since the pandemic. However, many respondents identified challenges associated with synchronous online training. The primary concerns revolve around the inability to replicate the full spectrum of human connection, including non-verbal cues, emotional presence, and immediacy. Respondents also highlighted the challenge of forming deep therapeutic relationships online, which they see as essential to effective counselling. Additionally, they felt that virtual settings made it harder to confront personal issues and build self-awareness, both of which are critical components of their training. One respondent shared, **“Online is fine, but it doesn’t embed as well with me,”** reflecting a common sentiment that virtual settings lack the emotional and relational engagement of in-person training. Further illustrating these challenges, one respondent said, **“Sitting with the pain in front of you makes you feel in a different way than via a screen or through the telephone,”** suggesting that synchronous online settings may not elicit the same emotional responses as an in-person experience. Respondents who studied entirely online, including synchronous formats, generally expressed concerns about feeling less prepared.

Blended Training

There was strong support for a blended approach, which combines online and in-person learning. Many respondents felt that this hybrid model could offer the best of both worlds, providing the flexibility of online learning with the richness of in-person interactions. The blended model was seen as a practical solution, especially given the increase in online therapy services.

Asynchronous Online (Distance Learning) Training

The question posed to respondents was, **“Do you think distance learning training (fully asynchronous) without live teaching or peers can prepare a practitioner to offer a safe therapeutic relationship for real clients in a real-world setting?”** the consensus was “no” for a number of different reasons:

1. Importance of relationship building: Respondents emphasised that effective therapeutic practice relies heavily on live interactions to build genuine human connections. As one respondent put it, **“A profession based mostly on human experience needs a space where this experience is accessible in its complete organic form”**. Many respondents highlighted the significance of observing non-verbal cues and subtle behaviours, which they believe are compromised in

asynchronous learning. One person explained, ***“You don’t pick up the more subtle behaviours... the energy between two people in the same place is something that needs to be experienced before real-world practice.”*** Many felt that fully asynchronous learning does not adequately prepare trainees for the complexities of building therapeutic relationships. One respondent stated, ***“I can’t see how anyone could learn the relationship side of counselling answering a computer. It does not foster the human communication and emotions properly.”***

2. Need for real-time peer and tutor feedback to develop counselling skills: The necessity of immediate feedback was a common theme. Respondents felt that receiving live input from tutors and peers is crucial for developing counselling competencies. As one respondent stated, ***“You need real-time skills practice in person or online. Fully distance learning...wouldn’t prepare a student for interaction with clients and real lived experience.”*** Live feedback from tutors was seen as essential for developing therapeutic skills and self-awareness. One respondent noted, ***“You need one-to-one interaction and ...tutor feedback of that interaction to practice creating a safe space.”*** The significance of peer interaction, including skill practice, feedback, and group discussions, was frequently highlighted. One respondent said, ***“Your peers test you, push you, support you, and teach you in their own way. They are an important part of the learning process.”*** Another emphasised, ***“Peer work is essential for getting the feedback needed to understand what clients may be experiencing.”***
3. The impact on the development of self: Others felt that without live feedback, trainees might struggle to understand their own biases or build confidence for real-world practice. In-person training was also seen as essential for a deeper understanding of one’s emotional responses and the nuances of client relationships. Respondents stressed that interactive, live training is vital for personal growth and self-awareness, which are crucial for effective counselling. One respondent shared, ***“I learned a lot about myself, whereas, during online learning, I was just learning the subject... knowing the subject isn’t enough. It is very important to know myself and my reactions to be a good counsellor”.***

Those who trained exclusively through distance learning acknowledged that online training has advantages, such as convenience and flexibility. For those who answered “yes” to the question, respondents acknowledged that the profession must adapt to technological advancements. One shared, ***“We are moving into a more technological world and young people especially might prefer to engage this way.”*** Another stated, ***“The world has changed a lot after COVID, and now I think it’s convenient”.***

Barriers to Training

To overcome barriers for diverse populations, training needs to be financially accessible. 76% of respondents feel there is very little funding available, and 71% of respondents believe improved funding for counselling training would help address the mental health workforce shortage and provide more inclusive employment opportunities in the field. Although the survey responses did not identify specific financial constraints, the preference for in-person training could imply financial challenges, such as the cost

of travel and accommodation, especially when compared to more affordable online options. It is likely that financial considerations play a role in the increasing interest in online training.

Summary: Analysis of Counselling Training Methods

Survey respondents indicated that the most common method of counselling training is fully in-person at a college or university. Blended training, combining in-person and online components, was the second most popular. Synchronous online-only training was less common, and asynchronous distance learning was the least preferred. Synchronous online training was valued for its flexibility, especially during the pandemic, but many respondents felt it lacked the depth of in-person interactions. Blended learning was praised for offering both flexibility and rich in-person experiences. However, respondents expressed strong reservations about fully asynchronous learning, citing the need for live human connection, peer feedback, and real-time practice to build the relational skills necessary for effective counselling. Lack of funding was highlighted as a barrier to counselling training, which may drive interest in more affordable and convenient online options. However, the consensus was clear: in-person and interactive components remain essential for developing well-rounded, competent counsellors.

Human Connection in Counselling and Psychotherapy Practice

Respondents overwhelmingly agree that counselling practice is rooted in human connection, communication, and relationship-building. Eye contact, facial expressions, and body language are viewed as essential in establishing empathy, trust, and effective therapeutic relationships. This human connection fosters a deeper understanding of clients' needs, emotions, and experiences. One respondent observed, **“Counselling is all about human connection and attentive listening.”** Respondents consistently noted that virtual tools, while helpful, lack the depth of human warmth and empathy that is central to counselling.

Trust in Therapeutic Relationships

Establishing trust and building therapeutic relationships were identified as central to effective counselling. Many respondents emphasised that the bond between a counsellor and client is more than just a professional interaction; it is deeply relational and depends on the counsellor's ability to connect emotionally and empathically. One respondent stated, **“The very core of therapy is bound up in the human connection and the trust and confidence that inspires,”** suggesting that without this connection, counselling becomes mechanical and less effective.

Human Warmth and Empathy in Therapeutic Relationships

Several respondents stressed the importance of empathy, warmth, and understanding as core qualities of an effective counsellor; qualities best developed in face-to-face settings. One respondent succinctly put it, ***“We are human, warm empathic understanding is a core quality required to be an effective counsellor. This is best experienced for the client in person.”***

Transference and Countertransference in Therapeutic Relationships

Respondents highlighted the critical role of transference and countertransference in counselling, noting that these dynamics are more effectively understood within the presence of clients and counsellors. One respondent shared. ***“Human connection enables you to understand the transference and countertransference better.”***

Social Isolation and the Need for Human Interaction

In a world increasingly shaped by technology, several respondents expressed concerns about the growing lack of face-to-face interaction. They observed that many young people raised in digital environments may struggle to form meaningful in-person or face-to-face connections. This further highlights the need for human connection in counselling to combat social isolation and foster healthy relationships. ***“Social media and digital use are already isolating people, causing loneliness, lack of connection, and increased distress—we need more human connection, not less,”*** one respondent remarked.

Barriers to Client Access and Technology Integration

The survey also revealed some important statistics regarding client access to counselling services. Financial constraints were identified as the primary barrier, with 63% of respondents citing this as a significant issue, followed by long waiting times noted by 22% of respondents. In terms of technology integration, respondents viewed dedicated telehealth platforms, mental health apps, and electronic health records (EHR) systems positively. However, tools like virtual reality apps, mental health chatbots, and AI therapists were generally seen negatively. This suggests a preference for technological solutions that enhance human connection rather than replace it.

Professional Perceptions of the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Digital Tools in Counselling and Psychotherapy

The industry survey respondents offer an in-depth perspective of attitudes and experiences regarding the role and effectiveness of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools in the counselling and psychotherapy professions. This analysis is based on responses from a broad demographic, capturing varying levels of awareness, emotional reactions, and expectations about the integration of digital tools and AI into counselling practice.

Awareness of AI

There was a broad spectrum of awareness levels regarding AI's role in counselling. A significant portion of respondents reported low awareness of the effectiveness of digital tools and AI. This suggests that the integration of AI and digital technologies into the counselling profession is still in its early stages in many sectors. The findings indicate that many professionals are unfamiliar with the applications of AI and digital tools in counselling and psychotherapy or have had limited exposure to their practical use in therapeutic contexts. While some respondents indicated a willingness to engage with digital tools and AI, they also admitted to lacking sufficient understanding of these technologies to make informed judgements about their effectiveness.

Impact of AI

When asked about the current impact of AI on their practice, most respondents indicated that AI has not yet influenced their work. A considerable number expressed uncertainty about how AI might affect counselling in the future. While some professionals recognise AI's potential in the field, many remain cautious or sceptical about its practical application, especially given the human-centred nature of counselling. Respondents who foresaw AI influencing their work raised concerns about maintaining the interpersonal and emotional aspects of therapy. Ethical dilemmas and the practical challenges of integrating AI into a deeply empathetic profession were also frequently mentioned.

AI in the Future

The responses reflect a clear division regarding AI's future role in counselling practice. A significant number of respondents selected "Don't know" when asked about AI's future impact. This indicates that many professionals are either unsure of AI's capabilities or unfamiliar with its potential applications in therapeutic settings. A smaller but notable group of respondents predicted a negative or very negative impact of AI on their work. These professionals expressed concerns that AI might compromise the human connection, essential for effective therapy, potentially leading to depersonalised services and weakened client-therapist connections.

Emotional Responses to AI

The survey explored emotional responses to AI's potential role in counselling, focusing on whether respondents felt neutral, negative, or positive about its possible effects. The majority of respondents expressed neutral or negative sentiments toward AI's role in counselling. This reflects a significant level of scepticism about AI's ability to replace or enhance essential human elements of therapy. Some respondents worried about AI making therapy more transactional and less emotionally responsive. A notable portion of respondents expressed very negative views of AI's potential role in counselling. These respondents perceive AI as a possible threat to the profession, particularly in relation to job security and the unique value that human counsellors provide. Respondents with very negative views emphasised the fear that AI could undermine the empathetic nature of counselling by introducing more automated, less personal forms of client interaction. They expressed concerns that digital tools might erode the deep, personal connections vital to effective therapy.

Summary: The Use of AI and Technology in Counselling and Psychotherapy

The report reveals a broad spectrum of awareness and attitudes towards the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital tools in counselling and psychotherapy. Many professionals are still unfamiliar with AI's potential applications, and while some are open to the idea, most respondents are cautious, particularly when it comes to replacing human connection in therapy. Concerns centre around AI depersonalising therapy and diminishing the relational aspects critical to effective counselling. However, while AI may not be suitable for direct therapeutic interventions, it could support counselling practices in other ways, particularly in administrative tasks such as scheduling, data management, and client communications. By automating routine tasks, AI can free up counsellors to focus more on the therapeutic relationship, maintaining the core human connection while increasing operational efficiency.

Public Perceptions of Counselling and Psychotherapy

This report presents findings on public perceptions of counselling and psychotherapy, specifically addressing two key questions related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on awareness and engagement with counselling services. The industry survey asked 2 questions:

1. "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been a number of changes in the counselling and psychotherapy landscape. Do you believe the public's awareness of counselling and psychotherapy has changed during this time?"

The majority of respondents (58%) reported that public awareness of counselling and psychotherapy has increased positively as a result of the pandemic. This response indicates that heightened attention to mental health during the pandemic has led to

greater recognition and understanding of the value of these services. A notable portion of respondents (30%) expressed uncertainty regarding whether public awareness had shifted. A smaller segment of respondents (7%) believed that the pandemic had not affected public awareness of counselling and psychotherapy. A minority of respondents (5%) observed a negative change in public awareness during the pandemic.

2. “Do you believe the public is approaching counselling and psychotherapy more or less than they have done previously?”

An overwhelming majority of respondents (81%) reported that the public is engaging with counselling and psychotherapy more than they did prior to the pandemic. This surge in engagement is likely a result of the increased focus on mental health during COVID-19, with many individuals seeking professional support to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges arising from social isolation, health anxieties, and broader uncertainties. A smaller group (13%) felt that there had been no significant change in how the public approaches counselling and psychotherapy. A minority of respondents (6%) believed that the public is approaching counselling and psychotherapy less than before. This decrease could be attributed to several factors, including economic hardships, reluctance to seek help due to stigma, or a preference for alternative coping mechanisms over professional therapy.

3. YouGov Survey Results

Results from the YouGov survey commissioned by NCPS show that members of the public recognise the importance of the human connection in therapy, with only a small number of people likely to choose to interact with an AI-generated Chatbot over a human being (19%). How old someone is has an impact on that, with younger people being much more likely than older people to adopt new ways of obtaining support with their mental health. That doesn't mean they're less likely to want to see a counsellor – on the contrary, the data shows us that those who are more likely to use a Chatbot are also more likely than average to want to see a counsellor for their mental health support, as well as using a mental health app. A greater adoption of tech for mental health support simply seems to imply that people are looking for more support with their mental health in general. There is a highly positive response towards counselling & psychotherapy, and people clearly feel that it is an important part of mental health support provision.

Top Line Results from our YouGov survey

- **Almost 50% of people in the UK are familiar with the counselling & psychotherapy profession.**
- **Just over 79% of people in the UK agree that counselling & psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support.**
- **58% of people would be not at all likely to choose to interact with an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for therapy, and another 23% would be not very likely. This means 80% of people prefer to work with a human for their mental health support.**

- **41% of people in the UK have used counselling & psychotherapy services in the past.**
- **People would be most likely to access counselling for support with their mental health (with 67% indicating they would be likely to choose this for their mental health support), followed by 38% that would be likely to access support for their mental health using a mental health app, and finally, 12% would consider mental health support from a mental health Chatbot.**
- **If people were looking for a counsellor, they'd be most likely to choose a counsellor based on personal recommendation (53%), followed by using a search engine to find someone (41%). 29% of people said that they would look on an online directory, and 10% said they would try to find a counsellor on social media.**

We conducted some thematic analysis on our open-ended question, which asked – when considering using an AI generated Chatbot over a human being for a therapy session – why someone would or wouldn't do this.

The responses show a mix of positive, negative, and neutral feelings towards interacting with AI chatbots, naturally leaning more towards negative given that only 3.5 % of respondents were very likely to choose to interact with an AI Chatbot over a human for therapy and 8.33% fairly likely. Positive responses, though as mentioned less frequently, spoke about the increased convenience, cost-effectiveness, and efficiency of AI Chatbots. People indicated that things like the immediate availability and quick handling of repetitive tasks, as well as the privacy provided when discussing certain topics, were potentially good things. However, these positive aspects of AI Chatbots were very much overshadowed by significant concerns; things such as a lack of trust and reliability, a lack of empathy and human understanding, AI being inadequate for dealing with mental health issues, and general discomfort around the thought of interacting with a Chatbot. A substantial portion of the respondents emphasised a preference for human empathy and understanding, citing the inability of AI chatbots to provide the emotional support and nuanced understanding necessary for complex or sensitive issues.

It is also important to note that a growing adoption of technology does not necessarily mean that people are, therefore, less likely to choose to approach a human therapist for support. The data shows that of the people who are likely to choose to interact with an AI Chatbot over a human being when it comes to therapy, 48.2% have not used counselling or psychotherapy services. They are, of course, significantly more likely to choose to use a mental health Chatbot than average (71.5% vs the average 12.3%). However, they would still be very likely to choose to also access counselling (69.4% were likely to choose to access this for their mental health support), as well as mental health apps (67.1%). This shows that even though some people are likely to choose to access support via AI Chatbot, this doesn't mean they are unlikely to want to access counselling; they are actually still more likely than average to choose to access a counsellor (69.4%). This shows us that the use of technology for mental health support simply correlates with an increasing desire to access support for mental health in all its forms; the use of new technology does not preclude the use of human-centred services.

Demographics of Respondents

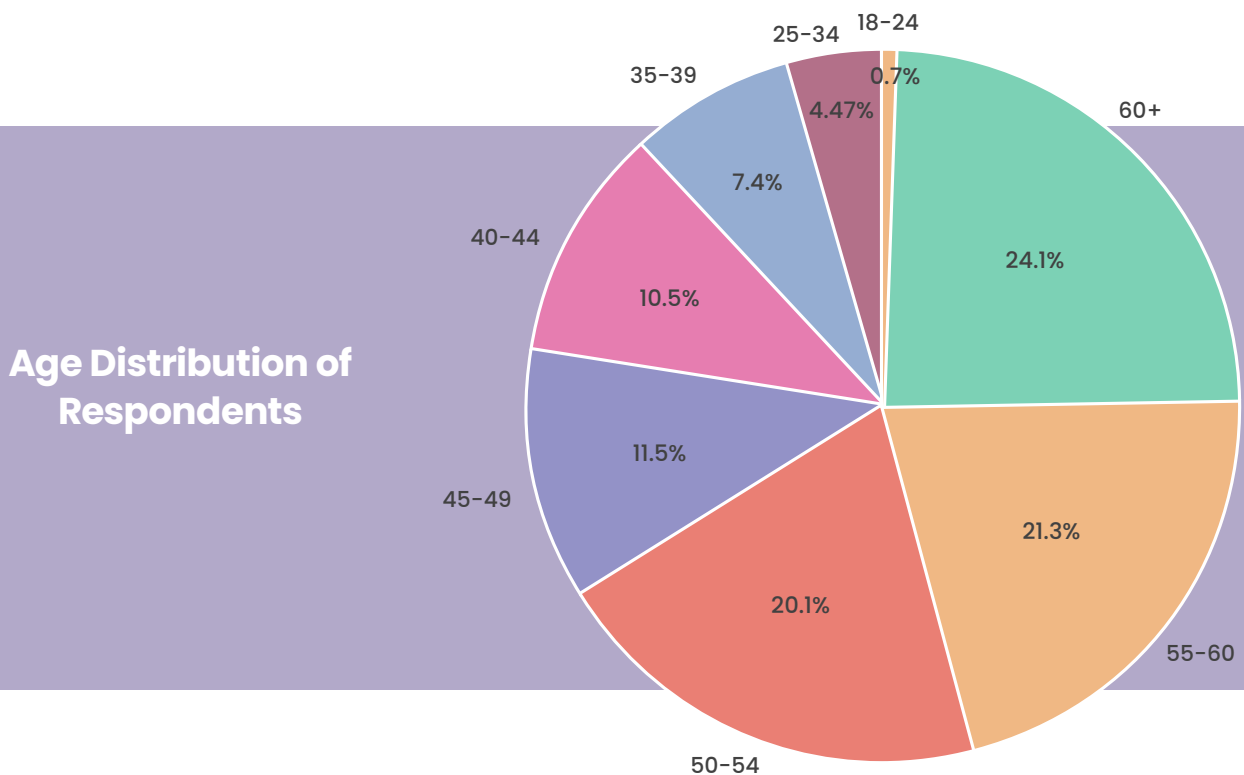
Industry-Wide Survey

The survey indicates that older age groups are the most represented, with those aged 60+ forming the largest portion of respondents. The gender distribution shows that approximately 73% of respondents identify as female, with representation across male, non-binary, and other gender identities. Most respondents identify as heterosexual, though there is representation from other sexual orientations. Ethnically, the majority of respondents identify as White, with some diversity including Black, Asian, Mixed, and other groups. In terms of disabilities, 42% of respondents reported having a disability, predominantly physical disabilities and long-term conditions. Educationally, the respondents are highly qualified, with most holding postgraduate degrees. Geographically, most respondents come from the South of England, particularly from counties like Kent, Devon, Hertfordshire, and London, while fewer are from Northern regions.

Employment-wise, 95% work in private practice, with a significant portion also engaged in the statutory, voluntary, and education sectors. The majority of client groups served by respondents are adults (90%), with a smaller percentage working with children, young people, couples, and families.

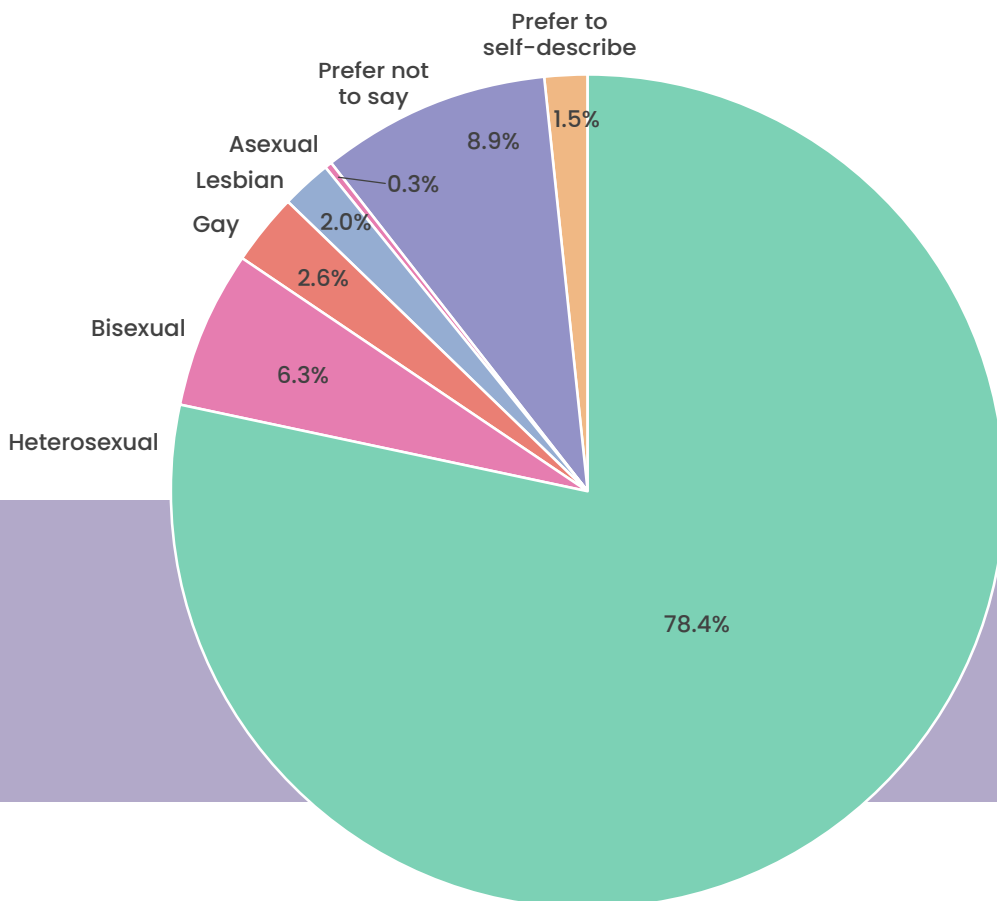
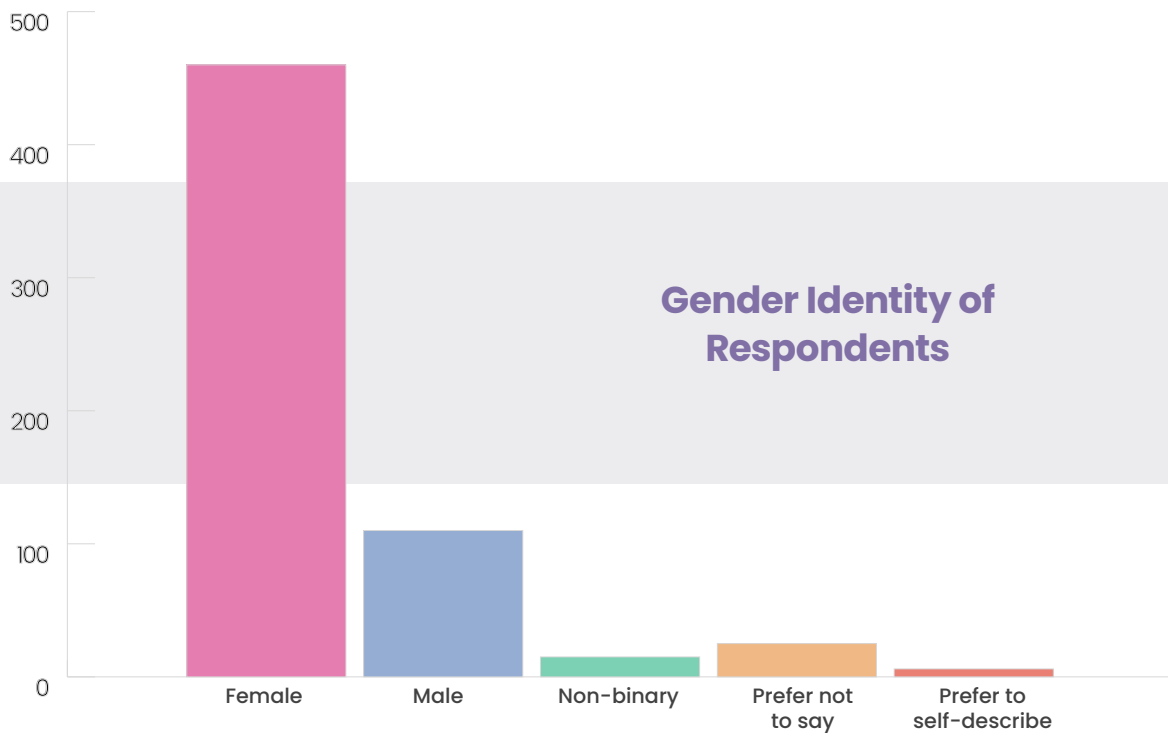
Age Distribution

The majority of respondents come from older age groups, with those aged 60+ forming the largest segment, followed by the 55-60 and 50-54 age groups. This suggests that the survey is predominantly engaging older individuals.



Gender Identity

A significant majority of respondents, approximately 73%, identify as female, followed by male, non-binary, and self-described respondents, reflecting gender diversity.



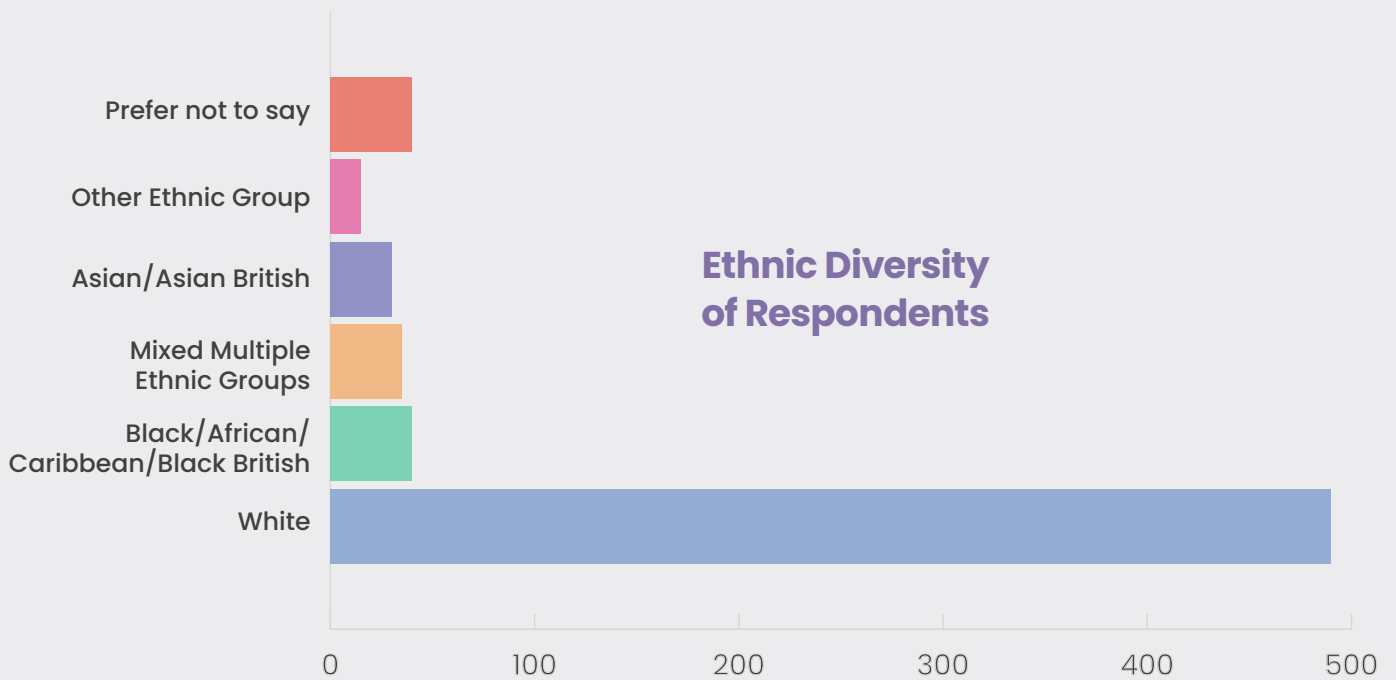
Sexual Orientation

The majority of respondents identify as heterosexual, with smaller but significant representation from other sexual orientations.

Sexual Orientation of Respondents

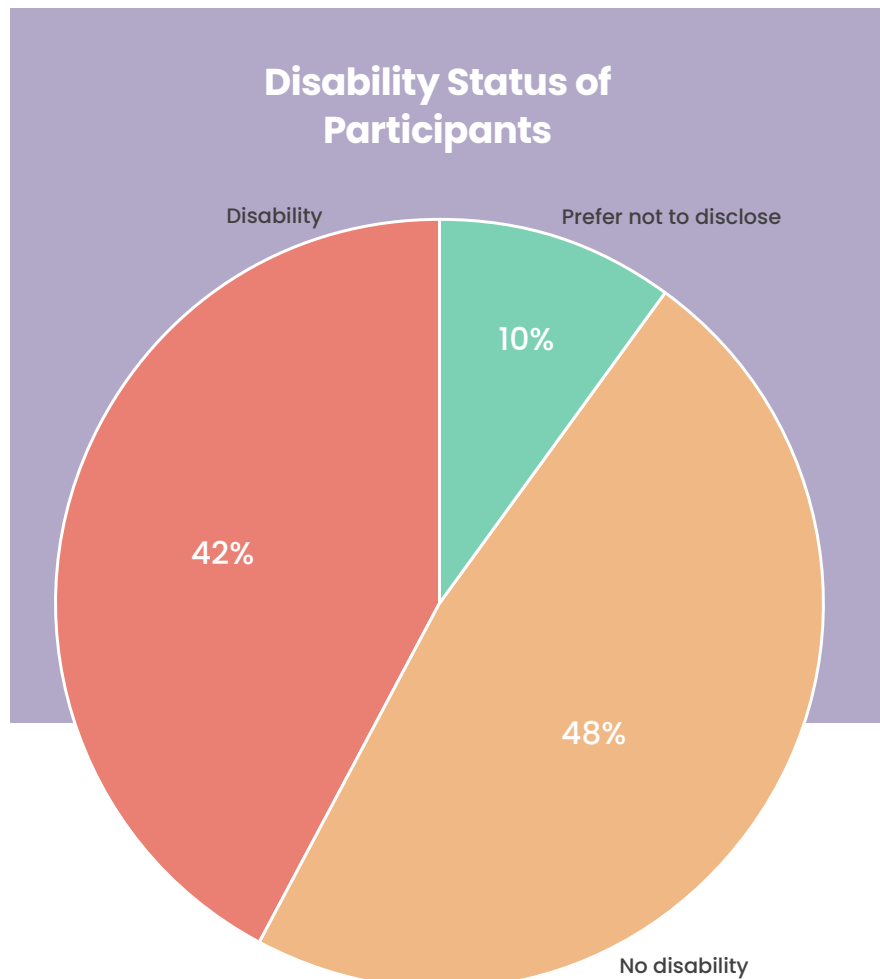
Ethnic Background

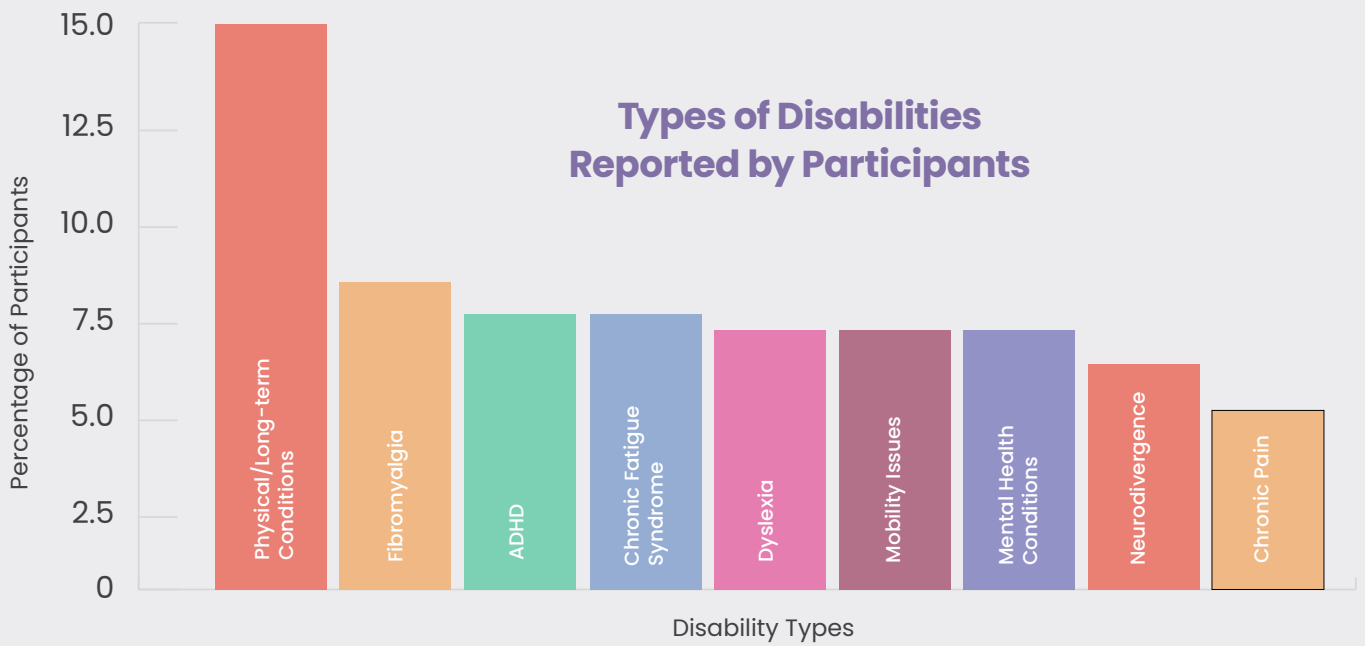
Ethnic diversity is present, though the majority of respondents identify as White. Other groups include individuals identifying as Black, Asian, Mixed, and other ethnicities



Disabilities

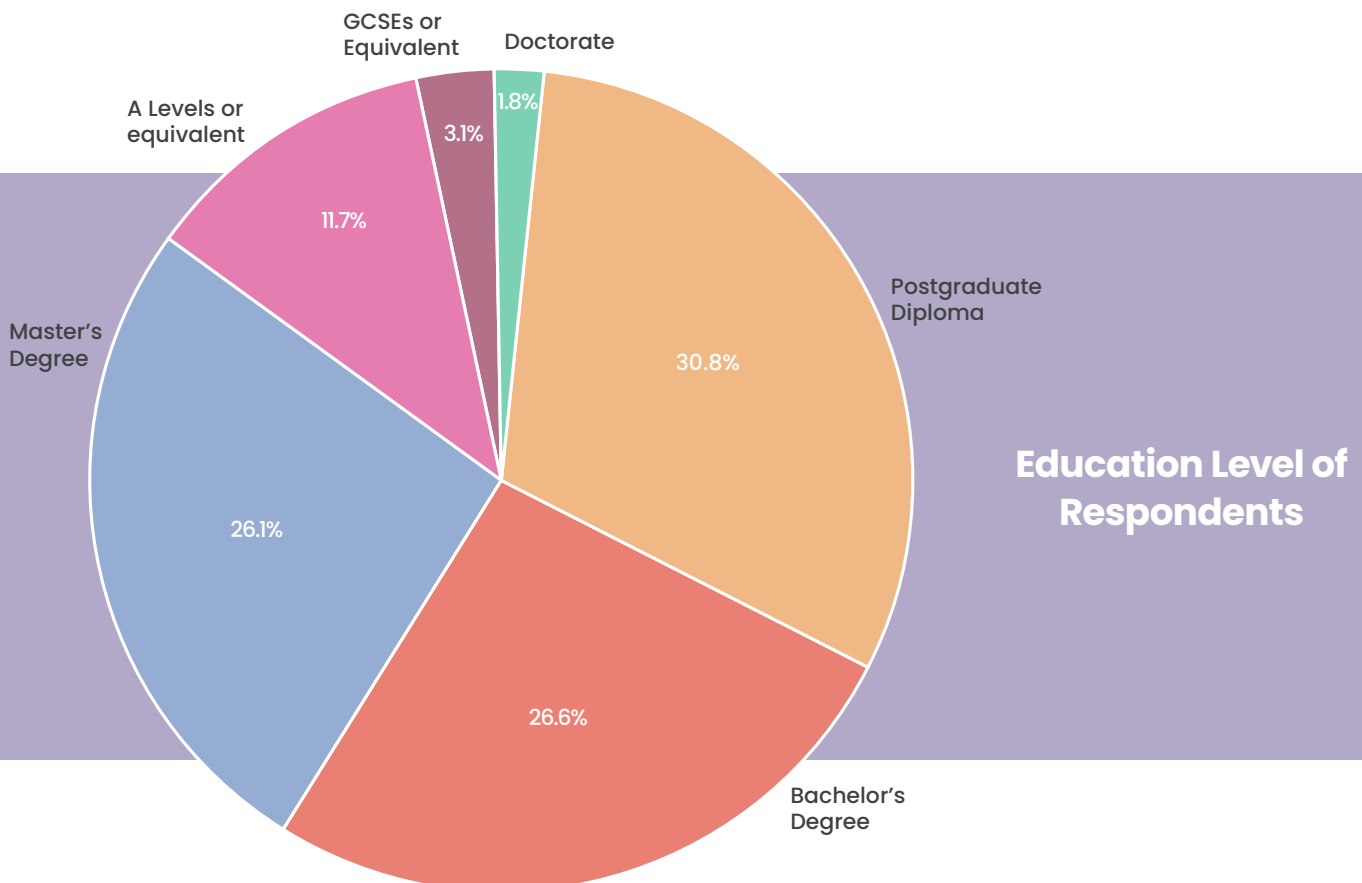
Based on the responses, 42% of respondents reported having a disability, while 48% indicated they do not have a disability. 10% preferred not to disclose their status. The types of disabilities mentioned vary, with physical disabilities and long-term conditions being the most common, accounting for approximately 15% of respondents. Our analysis does not explicitly report on how people with disabilities perceive online training, but since online formats provide accessibility benefits (like eliminating travel or managing physical limitations), we might make an assumption that individuals with disabilities could view online training more positively.





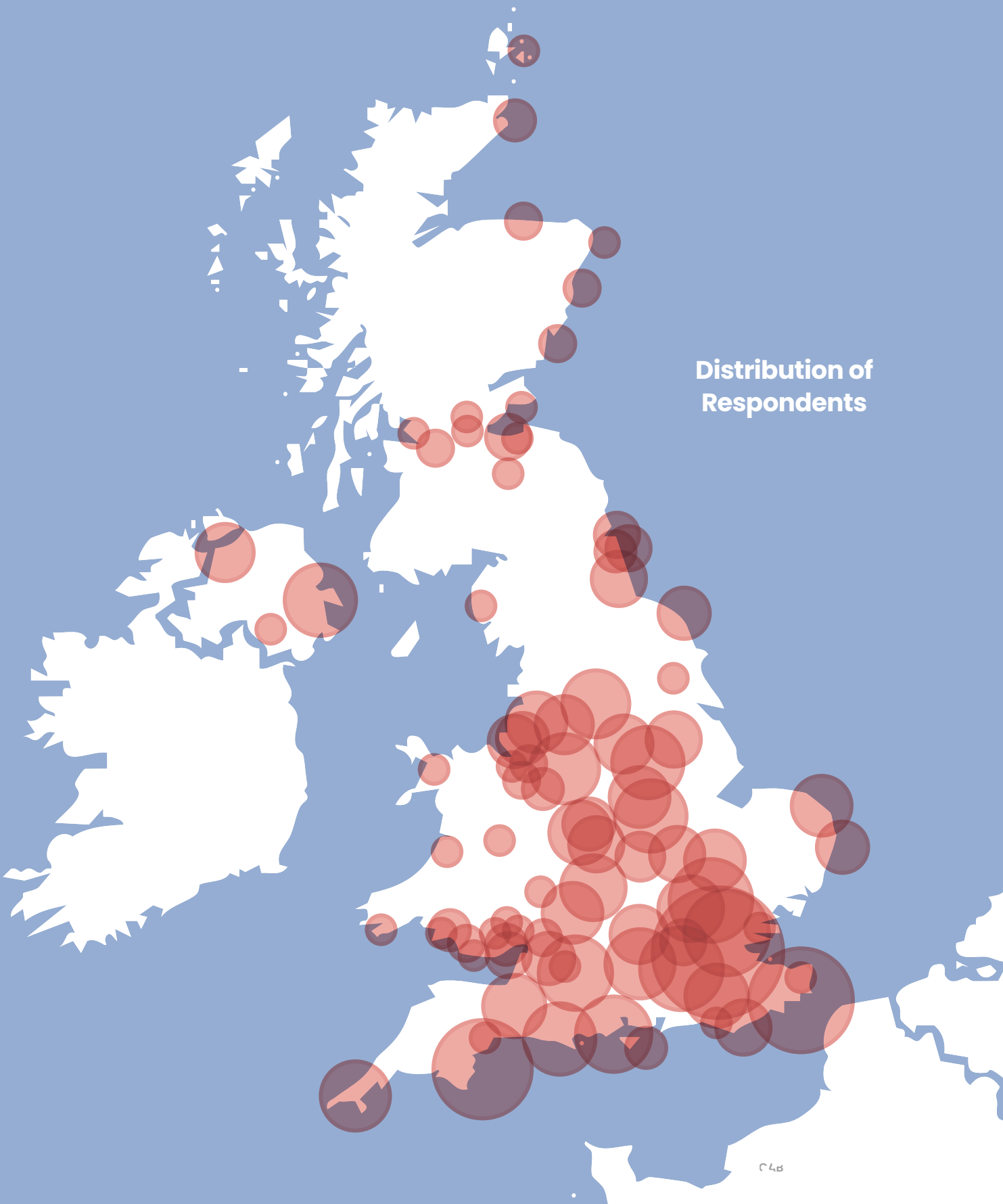
Educational Levels

The respondents are highly educated, with the majority holding postgraduate qualifications. This indicates a well-informed and knowledgeable survey base.



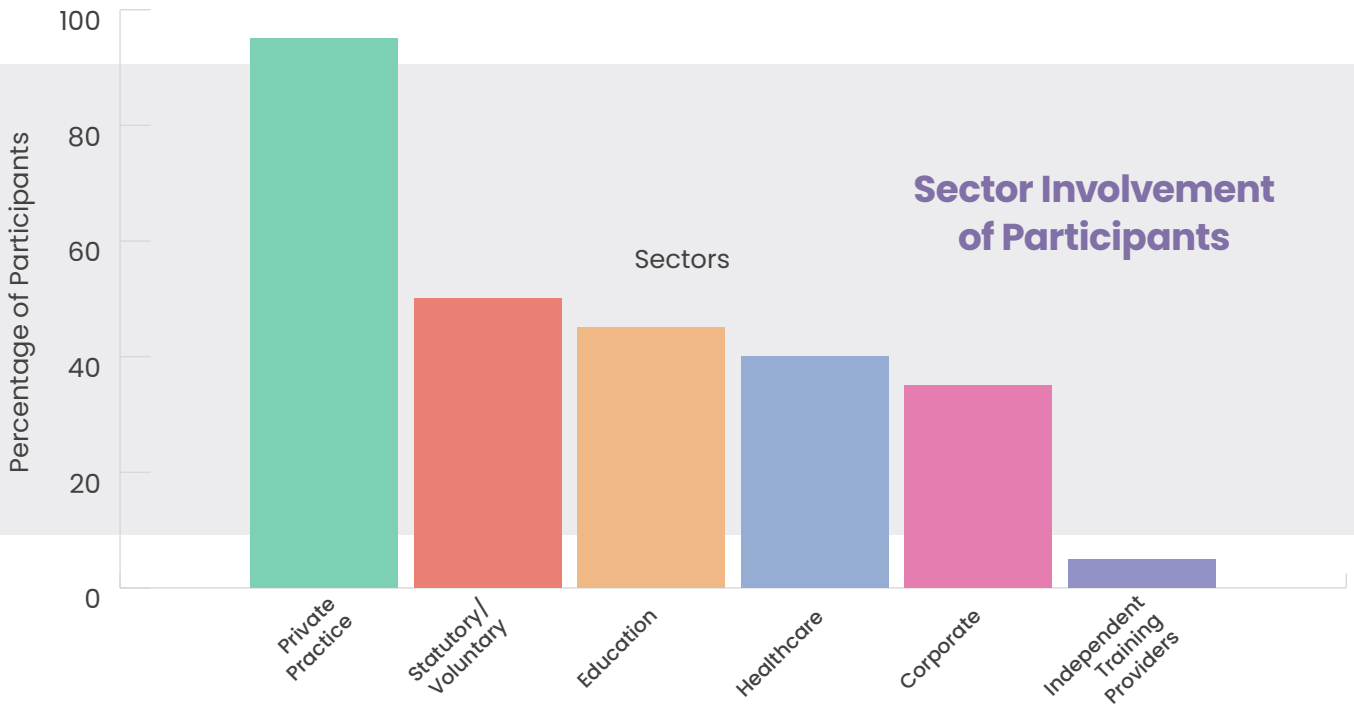
Geographic Distribution

Geographically, the majority of respondents are concentrated in the South of England, with high numbers from counties such as Kent, Devon, Hertfordshire, and London. Northern regions like Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire are also represented, although in smaller numbers. This indicates a stronger southern representation in the survey.



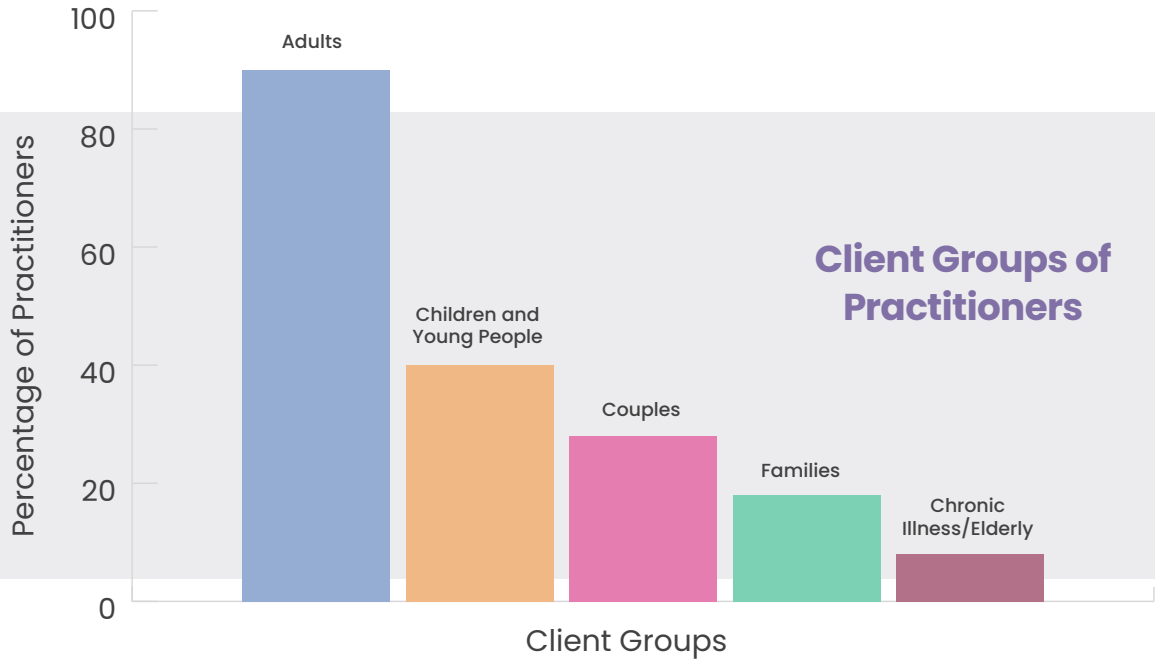
Employment Sectors

Based on the responses, 95% of respondents work in private practice, making it the dominant sector. Around 50% are involved in the statutory or voluntary sector, often in conjunction with other roles, while 45% work in the education sector, typically alongside private practice.



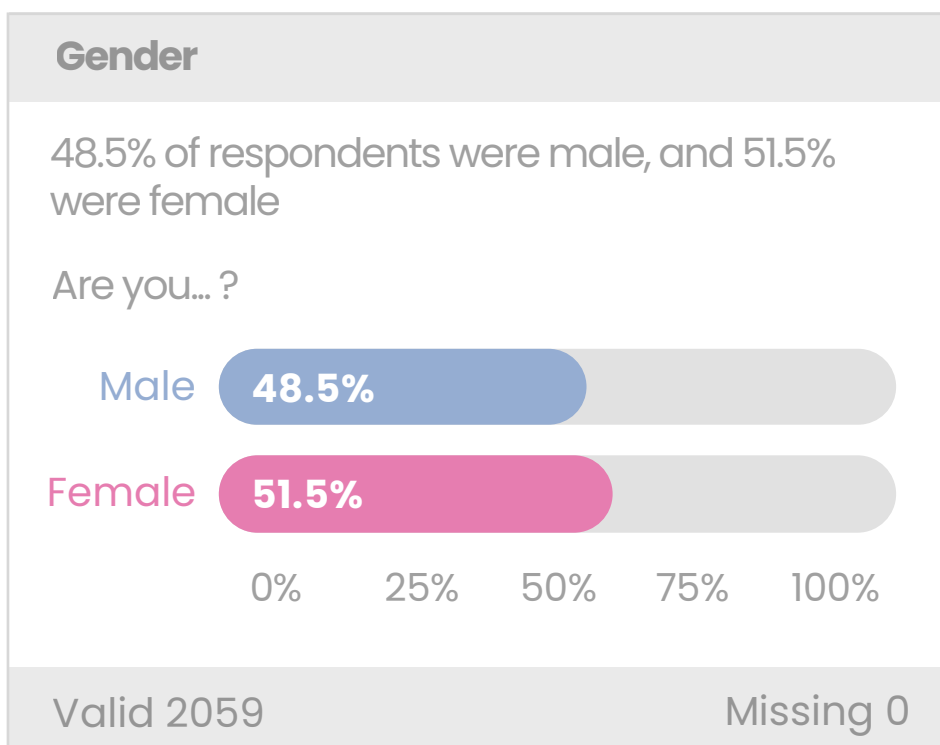
Client Groups

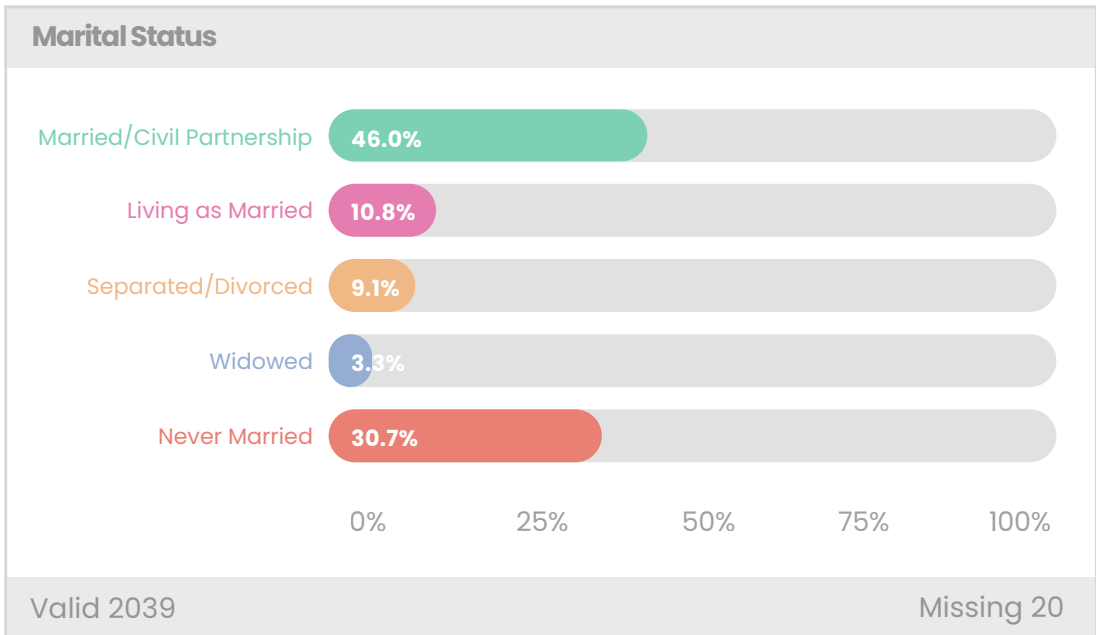
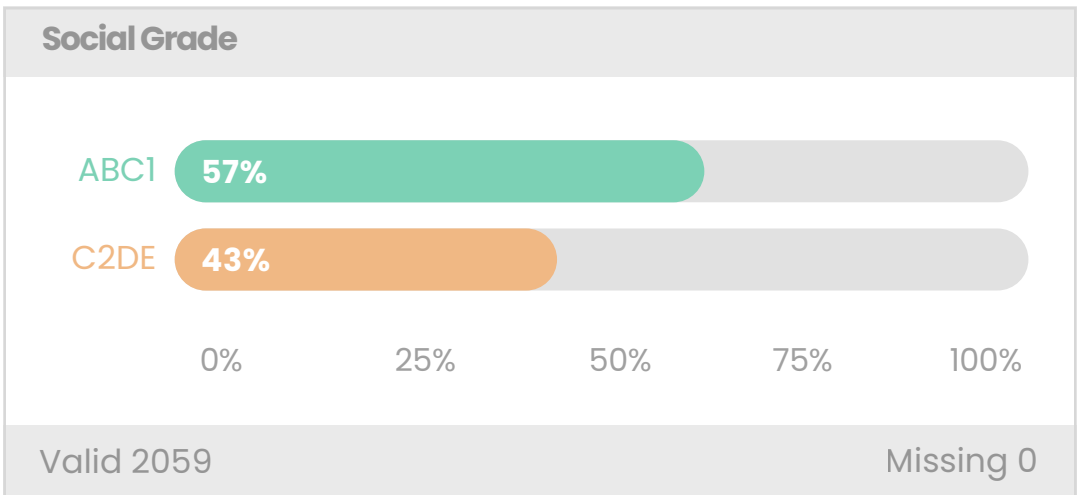
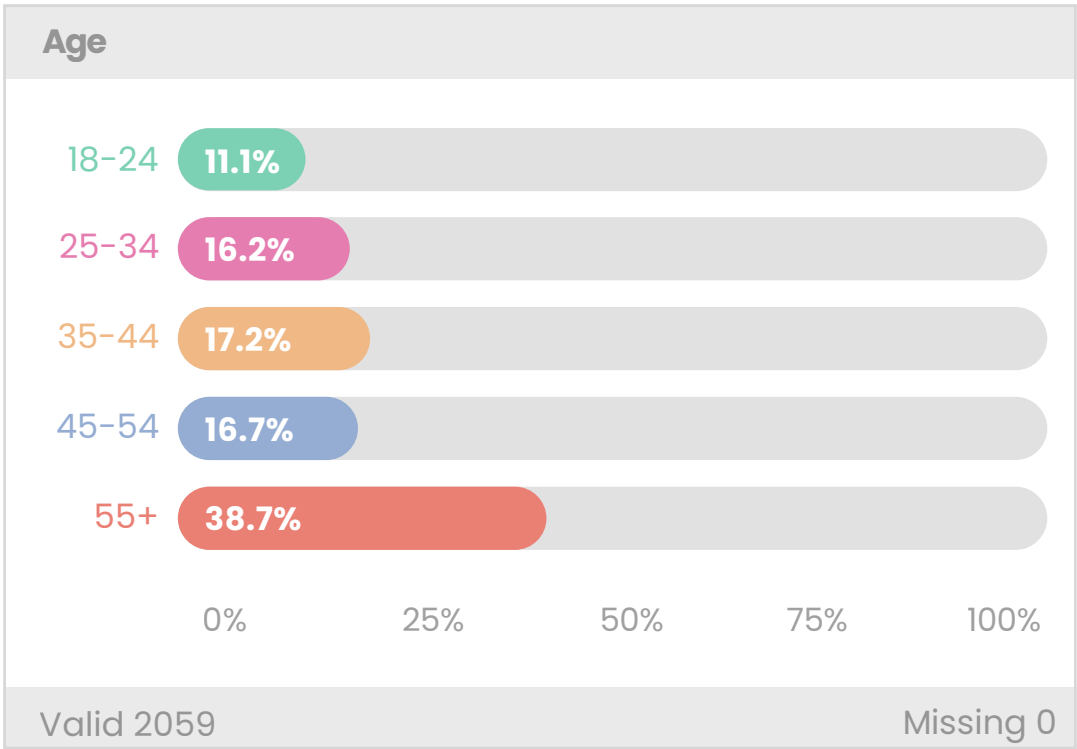
Based on the survey responses, the majority of the client base consists of adults, with 90% of respondents working with adult clients. 40% of respondents also work with children and young people, either alongside or independently of their adult client base. 25% of respondents mentioned working with couples, while 15% worked with families

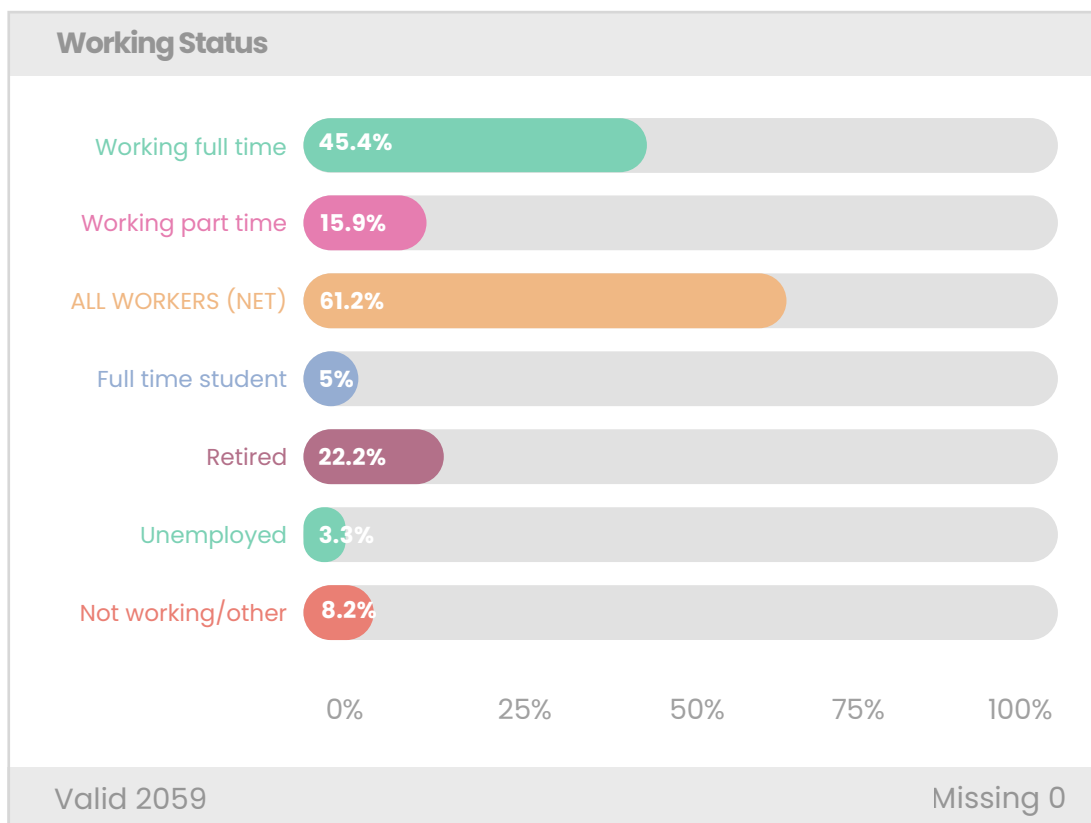
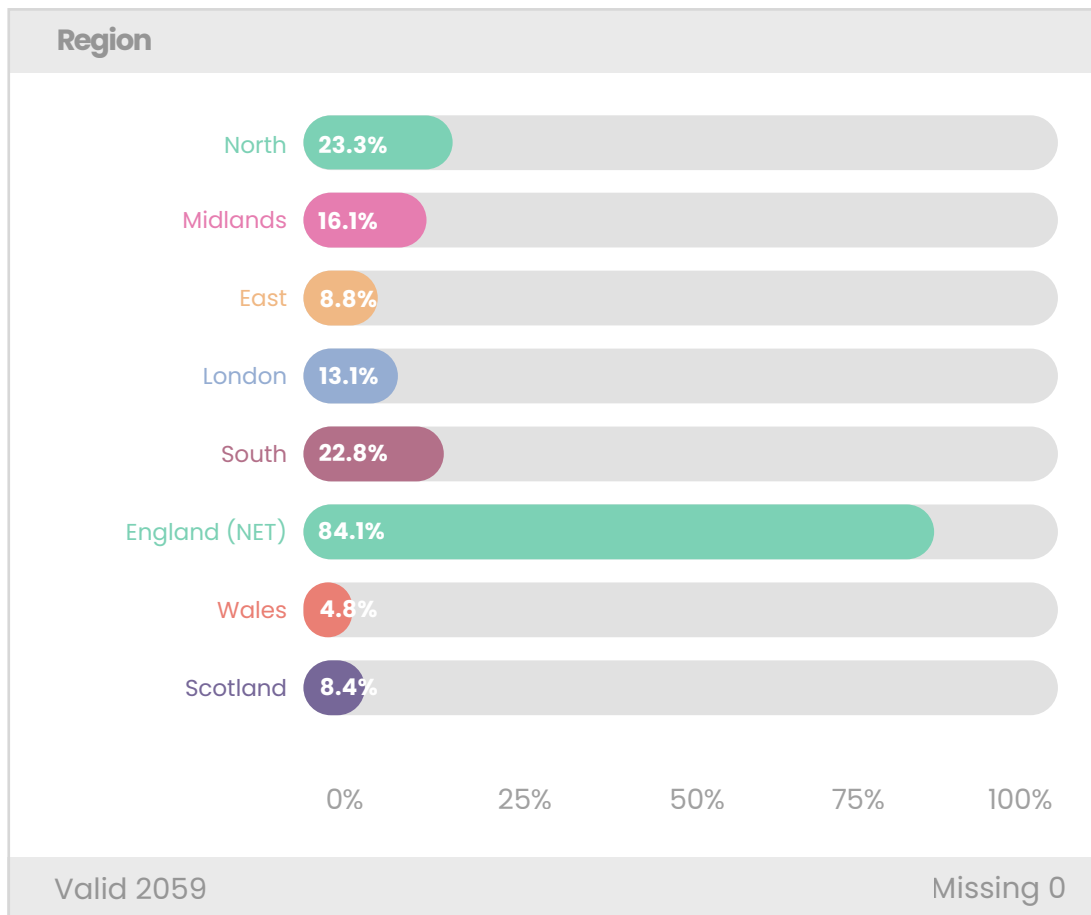


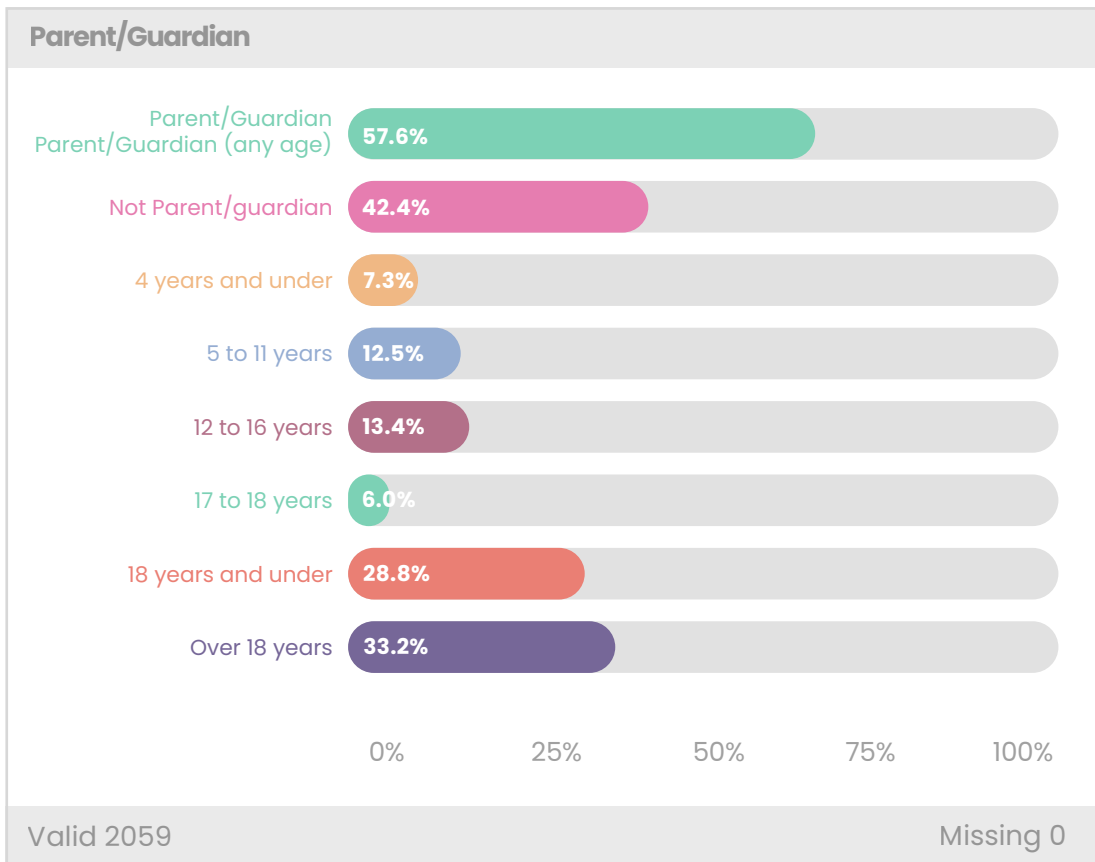
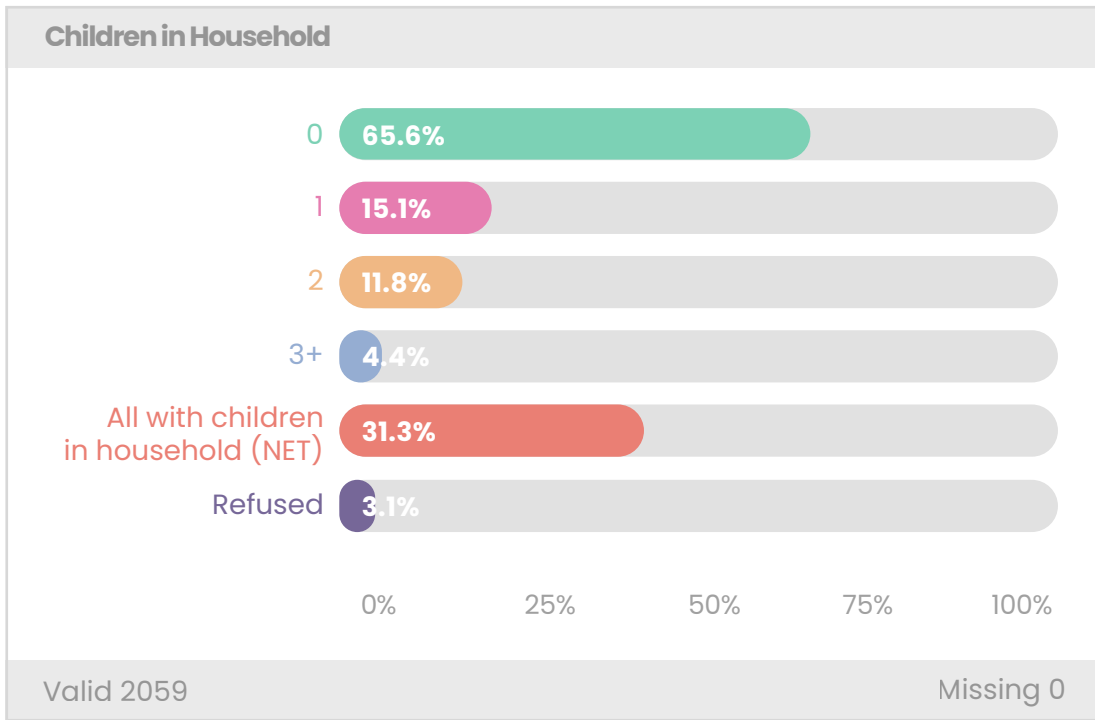
YouGov Survey

As the UK-wide survey was commissioned via YouGov, the figures were weighted so it can be considered a representative sample of all UK adults (aged 18+). A breakdown is as follows:



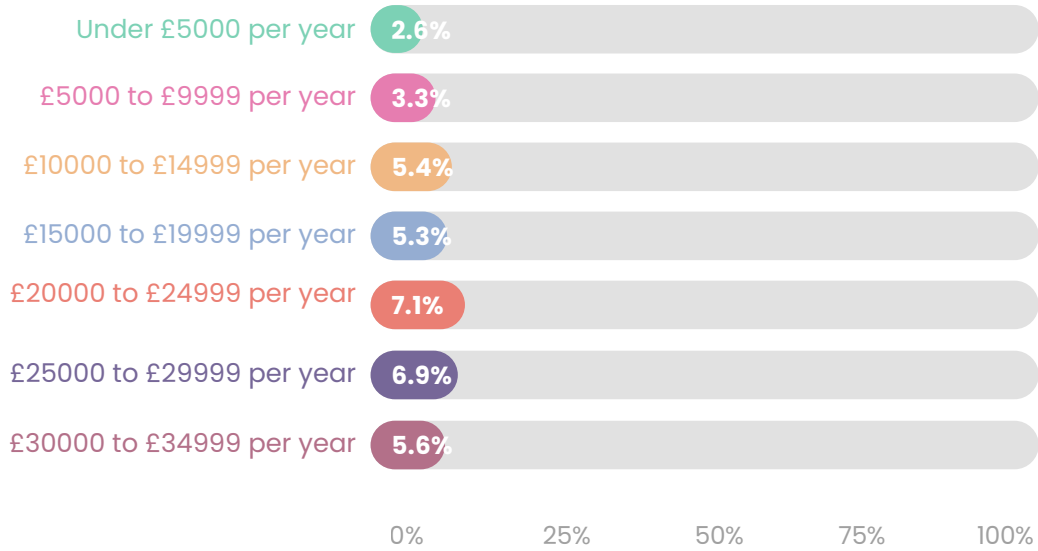






Gross Household Income

Gross HOUSEHOLD income is the combined income of all those earners in a household from all sources, including wages, salaries, or rents and before tax deductions. What is your gross household income?

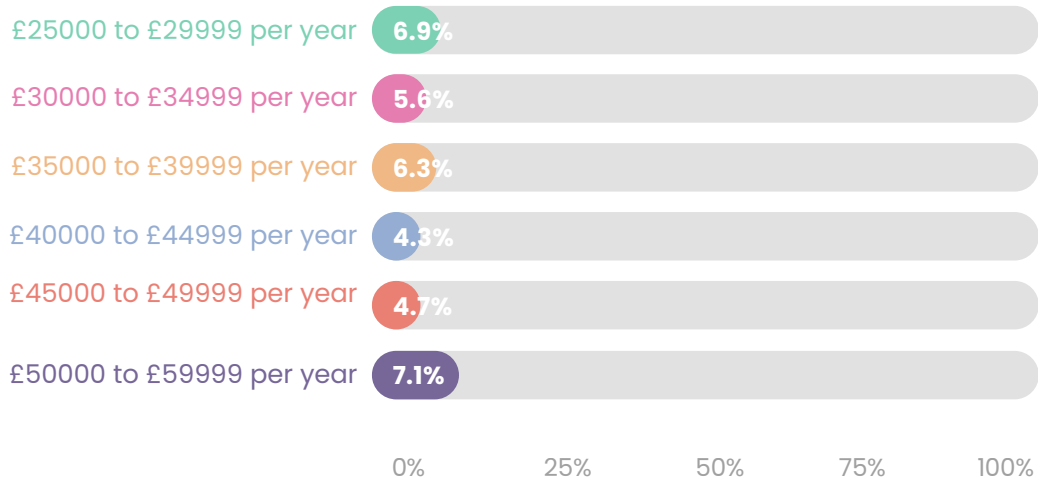


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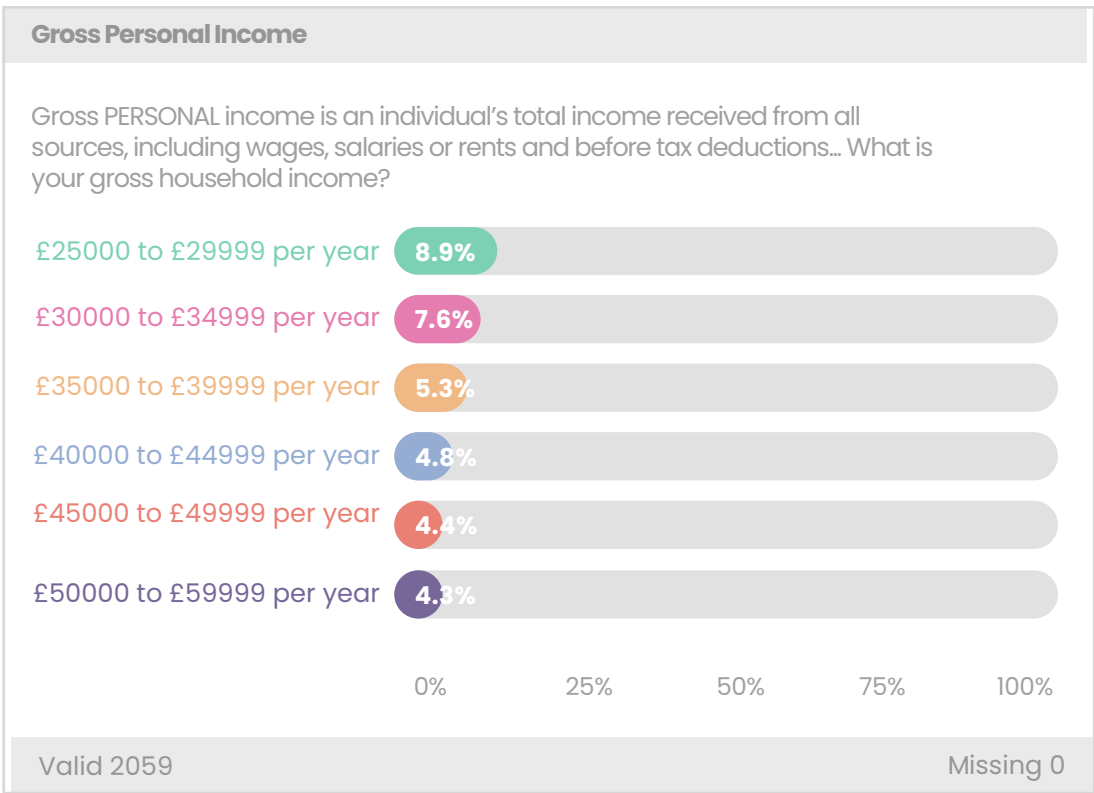
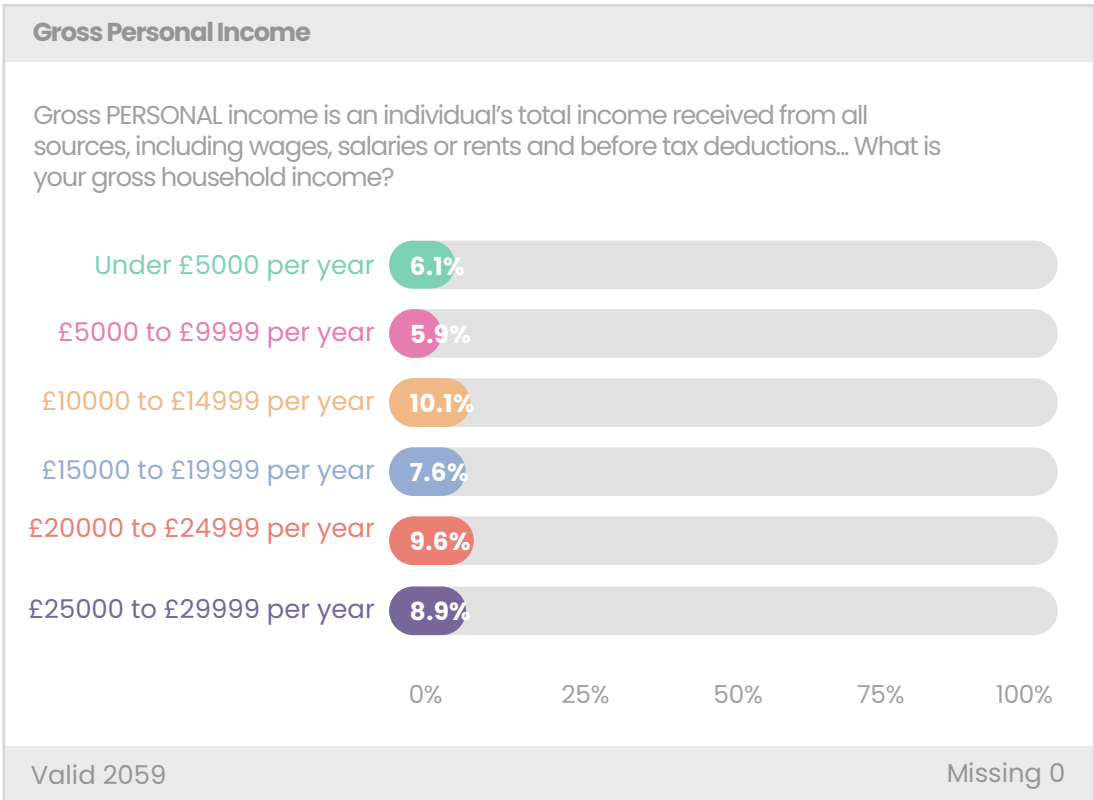
Gross Household Income

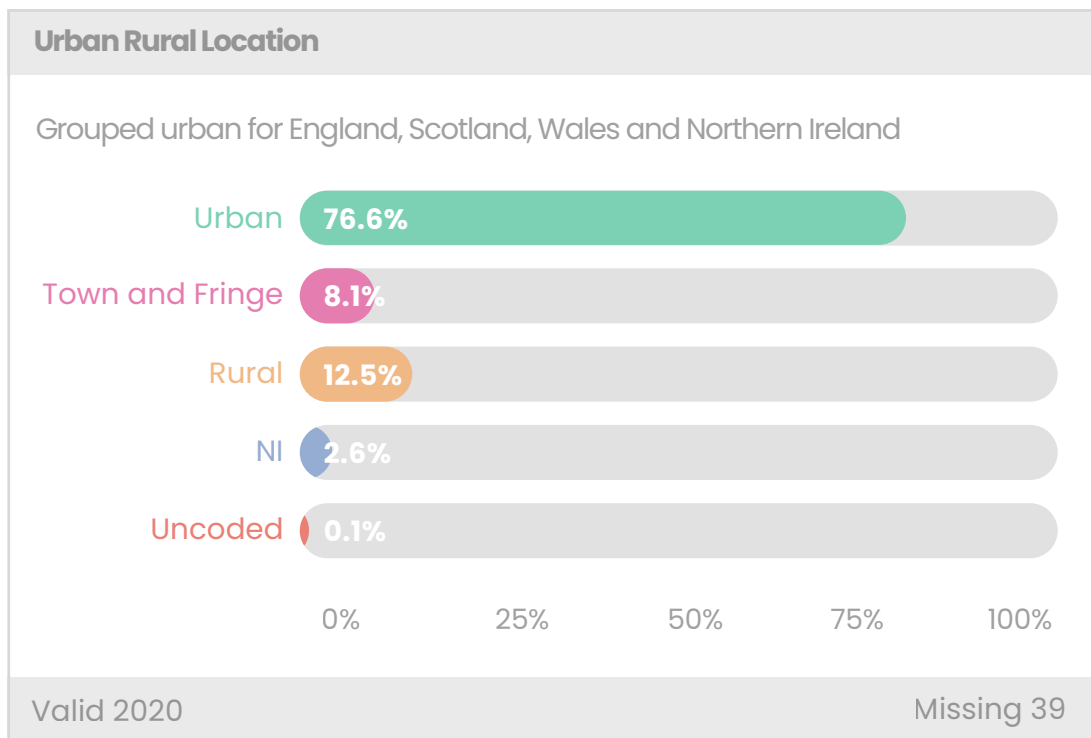
Gross HOUSEHOLD income is the combined income of all those earners in a household from all sources, including wages, salaries, or rents and before tax deductions. What is your gross household income?



Valid 2059

Missing 0





Conclusion

The findings of this report highlight the importance of human connection in counselling training and practice. While digital tools and technology offer new opportunities for flexibility, respondents from both our industry-wide survey and YouGov UK-wide survey overwhelmingly point to the irreplaceable value of real-time, face-to-face interactions for developing key therapeutic elements such as empathy, trust, and non-verbal communication. When it comes to training, blended learning, combining in-person and synchronous online components, emerges as a preferred approach, balancing the need for human connection with the advantages of the flexibility that online mediums offer. Concerns regarding distance learning remain significant, with many respondents expressing doubts about its ability to adequately prepare practitioners for real-world therapeutic relationships. In adapting training methods, inclusivity and diversity awareness should continue to ensure that counselling programs are accessible, financially viable, and reflective of diverse client populations. This approach will not only enhance the quality of training but also expand its relevance to a broader audience, preparing future counsellors to meet the complex needs of an increasingly diverse and digitally fluent society. Additionally, while there is some openness to AI and digital tools in administrative roles for counselling practice, respondents remain cautious about their efficacy in replacing the relational aspects central to effective therapy. Members of the public are also overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining that human connection when it comes to therapy.

CPCAB and NCPS are committed to using these findings together with our 'Therapeutic Relationships: The Human Connection' Campaign activities to raise awareness among both professionals and the public, as we advocate for the preservation of human connection in counselling training and practice.

In line with this commitment, CPCAB and NCPS will also use this report, together with research which highlights the lack of stringent regulation around the live delivery of guided learning hours (GLH) and instances where funding is allocated to counselling training programs that do not meet the required educational standards for guided learning. We hope that this will ensure that financial resources are directed towards training that truly upholds the integrity of the counselling profession.

This report has inspired CPCAB to not only continue advocating for high-quality synchronous human-centred counselling training but also to explore how they can strengthen their own qualifications to reflect these values. CPCAB is supportive of appropriately implemented technological advancements in the field and is proud to offer fully synchronous online delivery for most of their Level 2, 3, 5 & 6 qualifications. They support a proportion of synchronous online delivery for their Level 4 qualifications, including online placements in line with professional training standards. CPCAB has also collaborated with The Open University to launch their new Level 5 Award in Online and Phone Counselling Practice qualification, providing post-qualifying training in online and phone therapy, further demonstrating their commitment to evolving alongside technological developments in the field.

The NCPS will also be using this report to inform their work within the assessment of professional standards and work in collaboration with training providers to ensure that their courses reflect the qualities needed. They have adapted their training standards to acknowledge the development of technologies and a variety of ways of learning and practising counselling & psychotherapy, being conscious of the accessibility benefits that a blended learning approach has offered many learners.

In terms of counselling & psychotherapy in practice, the NCPS's ongoing campaign work and parliamentary engagement will be supported and shaped by the findings presented in this report, and they will be engaging with policymakers at all levels of government to ensure that the importance of human connection is considered when drafting policy or legislation around mental health support services. They hope to be able to reach members of the public with further campaign work around human connection in therapy, and will draw on the valuable experiences of those therapists who have been kind enough to input to our industry-wide survey.

Additionally, these findings provide the basis for future research, including follow-up surveys to track shifts in perceptions as digitalisation continues to evolve within the profession. We will engage with ongoing research in this area to stay at the forefront of these changes.

As digitalisation becomes more integrated into the professions, CPCAB and NCPS will continue to ensure that the core principles of empathy, human connection, and relationship remain central to our work, balancing innovation with the irreplaceable value of human interaction in counselling and training.

Recommendations based on the Report Findings

Training Providers

Adopt a blended learning approach: Training providers should develop training that balances flexibility with the essential face-to-face interactions needed to develop core counselling skills, ensuring that human connection remains central to the training experience.

Improve online learning: To address concerns about the limitations of human connection in synchronous online learning, training providers should integrate more live feedback and experiential learning opportunities. For instance, regular video-based skills practice sessions can replicate some aspects of the human connection.

Improve accessibility: Online training provides some accessibility advantages, especially for learners in more remote geographical locations, from diverse backgrounds or those with disabilities. However, training providers should invest in replicating the relational dynamics of in-person learning, making sure that the digital environment is as inclusive as possible.

Consider selection criteria: Exercise caution when applying Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) criteria to candidates whose previous training is fully asynchronous (distance) training, as they are unlikely to have developed the practical skills and self-awareness to the same level as candidates approaches from face-to-face or synchronous online training. This may require greater input from subsequent trainers to aid competency in these areas.

Commitment to meaningful learning: When considering moving provision from live teaching to distance learning training, consider the needs of candidates, the profession, and future clients. Distance learning in counselling is unlikely to meet a candidate's needs for progression to higher levels of training and hinder their progression into the profession or ability to gain professional association membership.

Tutors

Develop skills in online delivery: Tutors should ensure they are adequately trained and experienced in online delivery for counselling training, and keep informed about technological advances that facilitate human connection in counselling practice

Increase interactive components in online learning: Tutors should use online learning platforms which incorporate effective peer-to-peer interaction, live discussions, and practical exercises that simulate the in-person experience. Practical sessions, where learners can receive immediate feedback, are crucial for building the confidence and competence required for counselling.

Learners

Research professional registration requirements: Learners should seek out counselling training programs that meet professional standards. Professional Association membership and registration requires training to meet minimum guided learning which is delivered through synchronous methods. This is considered essential to ensure the development of the practical and interpersonal skills necessary for safe and effective therapeutic practice.

Research employer requirements: Learners should seek out counselling training that meets the needs of future employers and clients. Distance learning is unlikely to provide learners with the skills and self-awareness to gain employment or work effectively in self-employed settings in a competitive field.

Counsellors and Psychotherapy Practitioners

Ethical Guidelines: Practitioners should use AI to augment human interaction, not replace it. They should work within an ethical framework to ensure data privacy and client safety are incorporated into the key principles and values of ethical practice

Promote the Value of Human Connection: As digitalisation increases, Counselling Organisations and Practitioners should advocate for the irreplaceable role of human connection in therapeutic services and outcomes.

Expand Access Through Telehealth: Practitioners should be aware of and use telehealth services, which can support health and well-being, to ensure that clients receive appropriate levels of care.

The Public

Informed Choices: The public should seek services from counsellors and psychotherapists who belong to a Professional Association, preferably one which is an Accredited Register holder with the Professional Standards Authority (PSA). This provides a quality mark of practice, ensuring minimum training requirements have been met, and ensures public safety and protection.

Additional Key Recommendations

Advocate for increased financial accessibility and diversity awareness in counselling training programs, ensuring that high-quality education is available to a broader, more inclusive range of learners while maintaining the focus on human connection.

Definition of Terms

Human Connection: The emotional and relational bond formed between individuals, characterised by empathy, trust, and non-verbal communication. It is viewed as essential for building effective therapeutic relationships in counselling.

Distance Learning (Asynchronous Training): A mode of learning where learners and tutors are not present together in real-time, often involving pre-recorded materials, workbooks, or tasks that learners complete at their own pace. This may take place online or via post.

Synchronous Online Training: Online training that takes place in real-time, with live interactions between learners and tutors, replicating the immediacy of face-to-face learning through a virtual platform.

In-person Training: Training that occurs in a physical classroom (for example) with real-time interaction between learners and tutors, where non-verbal cues and emotional presence play an essential role.

Face-to-Face: Interactions where (for example, the tutor and learner or counsellor and client) are physically present together in the same room or online, allowing for direct live communication.

Blended Learning: A combination of online and in-person training, integrating both real-time online sessions and physical classroom learning to offer flexibility while maintaining human interaction.

Guided Learning: A structured learning process where learners are taught or instructed by – or otherwise participating in education or training under the immediate guidance or supervision of – a lecturer, supervisor, tutor or other appropriate provider of education or training.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): The simulation of human intelligence processes by machines, especially computers. In counselling, AI is increasingly considered for administrative roles but is viewed with caution when integrated into the core therapeutic process

Digitalisation: The increasing integration of digital technologies, such as online platforms, AI, and telehealth services, in various aspects of counselling and training.

Therapeutic Relationship: The professional, yet empathetic bond formed between a counsellor and a client, characterised by trust, understanding, and emotional support

Empathy: The ability to understand and respond to the feelings of another, a core competency in counselling that fosters trust and connection between the counsellor and client.

Transference and Countertransference: Psychological concepts in therapy where the client projects feelings onto the counsellor (transference) and the counsellor responds with personal emotions influenced by the client's transference (countertransference)

Experiential Learning: A hands-on learning approach in which learners gain knowledge, skills, and emotional maturity through real-life practice, such as role-playing, peer interactions, and practical exercises.

Self-Awareness: An individual's understanding of their own emotions, reactions, and behaviours, which is crucial for personal growth and effectiveness as a counsellor

Relational Model: A therapeutic approach that emphasises the importance of relationships in human development and well-being, focusing on the dynamics between counsellor and client.

Telehealth: The use of digital communication technologies, such as analytic online tools and video conferencing, to provide healthcare services, including mental health counselling, remotely.

Thematic Analysis: A method of analysing qualitative data by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights within survey or interview responses.

Appendix 1

Therapeutic Relationships: **The Human Connection CPCAB Industry-wide survey questions**

Appendix 2

The questions asked in the YouGov survey were as follows:

1. **How familiar, if at all, are you with the professions of counselling and psychotherapy?**
2. **To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Counselling and psychotherapy services are essential for mental health support"**
3. **How likely, if at all, would you be to consider interacting with an AI-generated Chatbot over a human being for your counselling/psychotherapy session?**
4. **You previously said that you are [very likely / fairly likely / not very likely / not at all likely] to consider interacting with an AI-generated Chatbot over human being...What are your reasons for this?**
5. **Have you ever used counselling or psychotherapy services?**
6. **Please imagine you wanted to access support for your mental health...How likely, if at all, would you be to look into the following? Counselling / Mental Health app /Mental Health Chatbot**
7. **Still imagine that you wanted to access support for your mental health.. Through which, if any, of the following methods, would you look to access a counsellor?**

Appendix 3

About the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body (CPCAB)

CPCAB has been at the forefront of counselling education since 1994. As the only UK Awarding Organisation specifically run by counsellors for counsellors, CPCAB plays a pivotal role in setting and maintaining high standards in the field of counselling training. CPCAB offers vocational qualifications across more than 200 training centres and 400 locations within the UK and overseas, with over 16,000 learners enrolling annually.

As an Awarding Organisation, CPCAB is responsible for developing and accrediting qualifications that meet the training standards of the profession and reflect the organisation's philosophy. For CPCAB, this means developing counselling qualifications that are designed with theoretical content and practical learning experiences to ensure that learners are equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and qualities to become safe, effective and compassionate counsellors, able to support diverse communities

CPCAB's role in counselling training creates a robust framework for delivering counselling qualifications that are nationally recognised. By setting clear assessment criteria for competence, CPCAB helps training providers offer structured, high-quality learning experiences. Training providers are required to meet CPCAB's standards for quality assurance, which ensures they offer comprehensive and ethical training that aligns with current professional requirements. Tutors benefit from CPCAB's support and training through a full range of qualification resources and ongoing training and development opportunities. This support allows tutors to maintain high standards in their teaching while fostering inclusive and ethical learning environments.

CPCAB qualifications ensure that learners receive education that is relevant and practical. With qualifications that emphasise diversity, ethics, and competence, learners are prepared to meet the challenges of real-world counselling. CPCAB's focus on vocational qualifications means learners not only develop theoretical knowledge but also practical counselling skills that meet professional standards.

Appendix 4

About the National Counselling & Psychotherapy Society (NCPS)

The NCPS is a member-led professional home for talking therapists, representing and supporting counsellors, psychotherapists, the public and our profession. The NCPS plays an important role within the profession of counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, and in May 2013 the Society was one of the first organisations to gain Accredited Register status with the Professional Standards Authority's Accredited Register programme.

The Society accredit individual counsellors and psychotherapists, as well as assess the quality of training courses and counselling services. They operate from a position of public protection through the Accredited Registers programme, and therefore have a robust and right-touch complaints process.

As well as their Registers, the Society offers a suite of benefits to their members, from CPD courses to Good Practice Guidance, to a regular member-focused magazine.

The Society believes that counselling and psychotherapy should be seen as a vocation and that the relationship between counsellor and client is of utmost importance for the outcome of therapy.

As a member-led organisation, the NCPS believes in the power of its community and its connections with members to shape the future of counselling and psychotherapy for the betterment of all: those who practice and those who benefit from our members' work.

The NCPS's guiding principles are in honouring professional freedom, the client relationship, and the unique nature of the counselling and psychotherapy profession.