

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Beauty and Wellbeing

Report on the value of complementary therapies in supporting the UK's health

January 2023

Introduction

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Beauty and Wellbeing has undertaken an investigation into the complementary therapies sector, to consider how the sector can support everyone's physical health, mental health and wellbeing and take pressure off the NHS.

The complementary therapies¹ industry is an integral part of the Personal Care sector, which includes beauty, wellbeing, and alternative therapies. These therapies can be key to supporting everyone's health and mental wellbeing. However, the sector's value, contribution and position as a professional industry is often misinterpreted and overlooked. With the NHS under increasing pressure, it is vital that the benefits of complementary therapies are acknowledged by Government.

The complementary therapy industry and the medical professions can work together for the benefit of patients². Medical professionals could be better informed on the merits of these therapies and how they can refer patients through the use of social prescriptions to deliver better outcomes for patients, especially for those who experience chronic pain or mental health conditions, and for the public purse.

To ensure complementary therapies can adequately support the NHS, we need to attract more talent into the sector and ensure all therapists receive the right training to become highly skilled professionals³.

We also need to enhance the perception of the professionalism within the sector, so that it is no longer seen as 'frivolous and fluffy' and non-essential. Building awareness and understanding of its value in supporting our nation's health is one step. However, it is also important to crack down on any bad practice and the 'underground market' of poor treatment.

We are grateful to all those who have taken the time to participate in this investigation, all of whom have added greatly to the knowledge of the group. We look forward to working with the Government to improve the landscape surrounding complementary therapies for the benefit of the Personal Care sector and hope that these recommendations will be carefully considered and acted upon.

Recommendations:

1. The Government must work with NHS England to better promote the benefits of social prescribing with GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals, and how they can refer people to non-clinical complementary therapy services.
2. The Personal Care sector team in the Department for Business, Energy, Industry and Strategy must work with officials within the Department for Health and Social Care responsible for social prescribing to better integrate complementary therapy services into the NHS, and produce guidance to support health professionals and therapists in doing so.
3. The Department for Health and Social Care must undertake or fund research studies to demonstrate the value of integrating complementary therapy services into the NHS through social prescribing.
4. The Department for Education must revisit the gap between the apprentice wage and minimum wage for apprentices aged 19+, and provide financial incentives for employers to take on learners on any 'job ready' qualification.

¹ [Complementary therapies, FHT, 2022](#)

² [Effects of Personal Care Services on Mental Health and Wellbeing, British Beauty Council, May 2021](#)

³ [Careers at the cutting edge: tackling the skills shortage in the hair and beauty sector, NHBf, April 2022](#)

5. The Government must give Environmental health officers (EHOs) greater powers to act quickly to deal with bad practice and lead a crack-down on tax evading businesses that are driving down prices and undermining legitimate businesses under pressure.

The value of the sector in supporting the nation's health

The personal care sector, particularly complementary therapies, plays a significant role in supporting and improving the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the UK population. With our NHS under increasing pressure post COVID, it is more important than ever that the benefits of these therapies are recognised. The focus on critical care has resulted in those living with long-term chronic conditions or with strong social needs lacking in support. Currently, around 20% of patients consult GPs for problems that are primarily social rather than medical, which could be addressed by the collaboration of the NHS with the ⁴wellbeing and holistic therapies sector ⁵.

The World Health Organisation Global Report on Traditional and Complementary Medicine in 2019 states: "In an ideal world, traditional medicine would be an option offered by a well-functioning, people-centred health system that balances curative services with preventive care."

Complementary therapies, when adopted by and integrated with the NHS, have almost invariably been cost effective and resulted in increased satisfaction of service users, with little or no risk of harm. Where COVID has resulted in some patients waiting too long for their treatments, some have ventured to alternative options, and shown significant improvements thus reducing the burden on NHS services.

Treatments such as massage can play a vital role in helping those with long-term health conditions manage their symptoms. Research⁶ tells us that, in the UK, around 9 out of 10 people have tried a complementary therapy and 90% of this happens outside the NHS. Cancer research⁷ has suggested that up to 40% of people with cancer use some kind of complementary therapy during their illness.

Outside of the NHS, complementary therapies can play an important role in helping people take a preventative approach to health, or even in identifying existing health conditions at an early stage in their customers. Complementary therapies have a range of preventative features and support existing health conditions in a myriad of different ways⁸. A survey conducted by the Federation of Holistic Therapists (FHT)⁹ shows a significant increase in the positive effects of complementary therapy practices alongside healthcare, including a 37% reduction in doctors' visits. Other findings indicate that the complementary therapy treatments helped with stress and anxiety (54%), muscular pains (41%), lower back pain (26%), joint problems (22%) and tiredness and fatigue (22%).

Using social prescribing to offer complementary therapies through the NHS has an important part to play in helping people live better for longer and compressing the period of morbidity and dependency at the end of life.

The use of social prescribing of wellbeing and holistic therapies extends the accessibility and benefits of wellness to all; it can provide life changing support for those with conditions such as hormonal imbalance, puberty, fertility issues, pregnancy, menopause, anxiety, and stress – to name a few. A report by the Social Prescribing Network ¹⁰ suggests that by referring patients seeking help for non-medical

⁴ ["Social Prescribing: where is the evidence?" British Journal of General Practice, 2019](#)

⁵ ["Social Prescribing: where is the evidence?" British Journal of General Practice, 2019](#)

⁶ [The "Complementary therapies and the NHS" British Medical Journal, 2005](#)

⁷ [About complementary and alternative therapy research | Cancer in general | Cancer Research UK, 2019](#)

⁸ [Introducing Social Prescriptions: Can They Aid Physical and Mental Health, FHT, 2022](#)

⁹ [37% reduced doctor's visits after undertaking complementary therapy, survey finds, FHT, 2022](#)

¹⁰ ["Social Prescribing could help alleviate pressure on GPs" The British Medical Journal, 2016](#)

issues to community based non-clinical services could help to take pressure off overstretched GP and other healthcare services ¹¹.

However, the APPG heard from experts that despite increasing Government focus on the role of social prescribing in the NHS, many GPs and practices are unaware of the benefits of social prescribing to such therapies. Equally the skills gap faced by the sector means not enough highly trained professionals are available to support the NHS in this way (which is discussed further in the next chapter).

Organisations such as the College of Medicine and the Integrated Medicine Alliance have prioritised training to help educate healthcare workers in the different types of complementary therapies. The key to acceptance of the various therapies is in education, not just for healthcare workers, but also young students in medical and nursing schools.

Collaboration between the NHS and the complementary therapies sector would also provide an acknowledgement of the importance and benefits of therapies which can support and aid both mental and physical wellbeing.

The APPG suggests that a cross-departmental approach within the government between the Personal Care sector team in the Department for Business, Energy, Industry and Strategy which is responsible for the complementary therapy industry, and officials within the Department for Health and Social Care responsible for social prescribing policy, could grow this opportunity and allow greater access and information on complementary therapies and their benefit in reducing the burden on the NHS.

Recommendations:

1. The Government must work with NHS England to better promote the benefits of social prescribing with GPs, nurses and other health and care professionals, and how they can refer people to non-clinical complementary therapy services.
2. The Personal Care sector team in the Department for Business, Energy, Industry and Strategy must work with officials within the Department for Health and Social Care responsible for social prescribing to better integrate complementary therapy services into the NHS, and produce guidance to support health professionals and therapists in doing so.
3. The Department for Health and Social Care must undertake or fund research studies to demonstrate the value of integrating complementary therapy services into the NHS through social prescribing.

¹¹ ["NHSPS' social prescribing hubs helping ease pressure on primary care" National Health Executive, 2022](#)

The skills gap

To ensure complementary therapy can adequately support the nation's health and take pressure off the NHS, we need to attract more talent into the sector and ensure all therapists are getting the correct training to become highly skilled professionals¹².

During the pandemic, many complementary therapists left the sector due to extended closures and was left behind at the bottom of the Government's list for reopening, time and time again. As a result, practitioners were forced to source employment elsewhere leading to a skills gap, and many businesses struggled to get back on their feet. Brexit also had an impact on a sector which relied heavily on a foreign workforce, with many practitioners returning home during COVID and not coming back.

Following the pandemic there still seems to be hesitance for practitioners to re-join the field or for more people to join complementary therapy training courses. As young people have been reassessing their work-life balance, alongside the cost of living, many have left the sector in search of higher paying or more flexible jobs elsewhere. The National Hair and Beauty Federation found that 57% of hair and beauty businesses had unfulfilled vacancies as of March 2022.

The cost of training courses and apprenticeships presents a significant barrier to new practitioners entering the industry and to the businesses trying to fund them. Despite new Apprenticeship being developed at level 3¹³, starts have decreased by half over the last five years, because taking on an apprentice is simply not affordable for many small businesses. There is a significant gap between the apprentice wage and minimum wage for apprentices aged 19+¹⁴. While sector businesses are looking for candidates with a particular level of emotional maturity who are able to show empathy to clients, they struggle to afford the higher costs of training an older learner with limited financial support.

The APPG heard that an increasing proportion of complementary therapists train in later life, which delivers a workforce with both enthusiasm to learn and provides extensive life-skills. Withdrawal of financial support for training post-19 and restriction of the Advanced Learner Loan to colleges has left the complementary therapy 'later in life learner' funding the whole cost of training themselves. With the current cost of living crisis and many of the potential 'later in life' trainees being women with families, the industry will face an economy induced training gap.

To address skills gaps and attract talent, a change in perception to fully acknowledge the professionalism of the sector is required. The quality and validity of the industry qualifications framework is underpinned by standards via the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in England¹⁵ and the National Occupation Standards (NOS)¹⁶ in the devolved nations, which form the basis of regulated qualifications.

The development and accessibility of regulated qualifications and training underpinned by industry standards, will be more attractive to both clients and potential therapists. The development, and communication of, the progression routes within regulated qualifications at post graduate level coupled

¹² [Qualifications and age restrictions, NHBF, 2018](#)

¹³ [Wellbeing and Holistic Therapist Apprenticeship, Professional Beauty, 2021](#)

¹⁴ [„NHBF calls on Chancellor to protect the hair and beauty sector“ NHBF, 2022](#)

¹⁵ [Institute of Apprenticeships, Standards, 2022](#)

¹⁶ [UK Standards, National Occupational Standards, 2022](#)

with appropriately funded apprenticeships, create an advancement of multi-disciplinary teams working within the NHS and provides the credibility the sector deserves.

Recommendations:

4. The Department for Education must revisit the gap between the apprentice wage and minimum wage for apprentices aged 19+, and provide financial incentives for employers to take on learners on any 'job ready' qualification.
5. The Department for Education in conjunction with the Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education to work with industry to develop appropriately funded apprenticeships progression routes, regulated qualifications at post graduate level, to create advancement of multi-disciplinary teams

Promoting the professionalism of the sector

During the pandemic, when access to the professional touch of Personal Care practitioners was severely restricted, consumers began to understand the value of spending quality focused time with a professional. Alongside providing crucial treatments, therapists also provided a listening ear, advice and emotional support which helps to combat loneliness and isolation. In addition, they diligently identified potential health issues such as skin cancers, self-harm and potential suicide. As we move forward from the devastating aftermath of the pandemic and gain an understanding of the effects of long-covid, a renewed appreciation of mindfulness, wellbeing and self-care remains. It is important in this context, to ensure that everyone has access to quality and appropriate wellbeing and holistic therapies.

Yet industry experts have found that the professionalism of the sector is being de-valued by an 'underground' market of practitioners who have taken online short one-day courses. While we believe most therapists are practicing to the highest standards, it is of concern to the APPG that an individual can qualify and be insured to practice in a matter of days via rogue schools and training organisations that simply exist to certify individuals with limited scrutiny of practice etiquette. The ease of access to, and affordability of these short courses, and the foreign insurers validating these qualifications, encourages aspiring therapists to take this route, rather than the longer and more expensive route of gaining a regulated qualification. This leaves a smaller pool of therapists trained to a high enough level to support the NHS through social prescribing.

There is a growing need to strengthen training in the sector to ensure that future talent is properly catered for and professionally trained, taking pride in working interdisciplinary within interprofessional health teams who can promote social prescribing. Greater scrutiny of short courses and online qualifications would help to maintain high standards of training and safe delivery of services.

A number of Professional Membership Organisations in the sector do already run registers of practitioners which can serve as an effective method of 'self-regulation', whereby these associations 'approve' complementary therapy qualifications, help practitioners gain appropriate insurance, and provide a route for the public to search the Register to find local therapists.

Environmental health officers (EHOs) are also responsible for monitoring and enforcing health and hygiene legislation in premises, however as there is no licensing system or regulation, it is difficult for environmental health officers to deal with clients risks and enforce against bad practice.

The Government must give Environmental health officers (EHOs) greater powers to act quickly to deal with poor practice. EHOs must ensure awarding organisations are offering qualifications and training programmes that meet Standards via the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education in England¹⁷ and the National Occupation Standards (NOS)¹⁸ in the devolved nations, which form the basis of regulated qualifications. This will help more professional practitioners enter the sector with the right level of competency.

The knock on impact is that the growing business model, whereby informal and unregistered businesses hire therapists, who despite their best intentions have not received adequate levels of training, and these businesses continue to limit prices across the sector. As such the higher costs incurred by VAT

¹⁷ [Institute of Apprenticeships, Standards, 2022](#)

¹⁸ [UK Standards, National Occupational Standards, 2022](#)

registered businesses mean they struggle to take on new apprentices and provide wage increases to their staff. Having just started to get back on their feet again after being closed for the best part of a year during the pandemic, these businesses are now facing spiralling energy costs in the current cost of living crisis, making the situation ever harder.

The complementary therapy industry needs to be viewed as allied to health to ensure that, where financially possible, they will not be eliminated due to budgetary constraints, bias or misunderstanding as they are seen as core referral service to improve patient health and wellbeing rather than simply a self-elected consumer luxury service.

Recommendations:

6. The Government must give Environmental health officers (EHOs) greater powers to act quickly to deal with bad practice, and lead a crack-down on tax evading businesses that are driving down prices and undermining legitimate businesses under pressure.

Conclusions

The evidence that we have received during this investigation clearly demonstrate that greater support and recognition is needed for the complementary therapies sector to ensure that they are able support everyone's physical health, mental health and wellbeing and take pressure off the NHS.

We hope the Government will review our recommendations in order to support the complementary therapies sector and ensure they have adequate funding and acknowledgement.

Annex

We also received written evidence from the following organisations and are grateful for the input and advice of complementary therapy and health professionals.

- Association of Reflexologists
- Belle Naturelle Beauty
- Bowen Association
- British Beauty Council
- City and Guilds
- City Lit
- College of Medicine
- Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (CNHC)
- Dr Rachael Frost (Senior Research Fellow and Herbal Medicine Practitioner)
- Dr Rajeev Gupta, MBBS, MD, MRCP (UK), FRCPCH (UK), MBA, Director International Organisation of Integrated Health Practitioners
- Elizabeth Plan
- Federation of Holistic Therapists
- General Council for Massage Therapies (GCMT)
- Habia
- Herbal Alliance
- Marcia Edwards, Pathways 2 Medicine
- Medicine Alliance
- National Hair and Beauty Federation
- National Institute of Medical Herbalists
- Pukka Herbs
- Reiki Council
- Sculpt Amour
- Shiatsu Society
- Society of Homeopaths
- Spabreaks.com
- Standards Authority for Training and Cancer Care
- the UK Spa Association
- Therapists
- Time to Me
- UK Reiki Federation
- Urban

About the APPG on Beauty and Wellbeing

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Beauty and Wellbeing was first set up in May 2019 to provide a forum for parliamentary discussions on issues relating to the industry. It aims to support the industry, celebrate its economic contribution and discuss the challenges it faces.

Officers of the Group

- Carolyn Harris MP – Co-Chair
- Judith Cummins MP – Co-Chair
- Jessica Morden MP – Vice-Chair
- Jackie Doyle-Price MP – Vice-Chair
- Peter Dowd MP – Treasurer
- Nick Smith MP – Secretary
- Caroline Nokes MP – Member
- Sarah Champion MP – Member
- Alex Davies-Jones MP – Member
- Kate Osamor MP – Member
- John McNally MP – Member
- Kevan Jones MP – Member
- Gagan Mohindra MP- Member

The Secretariat for this APPG is Dentons Global Advisors with support from the National Hair and Beauty Federation, the Federation of Holistic Therapists and spabreaks.com.

An All-Party Parliamentary Group is a politically neutral cross-party group of Parliamentarians concerned about a particular issue – in this case the beauty, aesthetics and wellbeing industry. Though they are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, many choose to involve outside organisations for advice and administration.

For more information, please contact the office of Carolyn Harris MP, Co-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Beauty and Wellbeing, or the Group's secretariat at appg-bawUk@dentonsglobaladvisors.com