

SOUTHERN HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL



Response to:

***Standards of Good Practice for
Counselling Services
in Northern Ireland***

January 2007

STANDARDS OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR COUNSELLING SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

A RESPONSE FROM THE SOUTHERN HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES COUNCIL

1. The Southern Health & Social Services Council (SHSSC) was set up by the Government in 1991 to represent the views and opinions of the public in the SHSSB area in relation to health and social care services. The Councils are independent from those who plan, manage and provide health and social care services.
2. The SHSSC welcomes the development of standards for this important area of work. We are glad to have an opportunity to respond to these proposals and do so from a public interest perspective.
3. We welcome the proposed regulation of counsellors and psychotherapists by the Health Professions Council. This is a much needed step that should not only quality assure services but also enhance the recognition of the importance of counselling as a core practice within social care. We are concerned, however, that no specific timescale has been set out other than "... the preparatory work required to establish statutory regulation will take some time." We feel it is important to move ahead with these proposals in a transparent fashion according to a clear and reasonable timeline.
4. The definition of counselling and the associated values set out in the document are helpful. The SHSSC is happy to subscribe to these. It is not necessarily straightforward for the public to ascertain whether a counsellor is appropriately qualified / reputable or how to judge whether a counsellor has offered a good service. Whilst this may be outside the scope of the current standards, there is a public information role to be fulfilled in this area.
5. Likewise, the 6 headings for the standards seem to be appropriate.

6. In relation to the responsibilities of counsellors, the SHSSC would be concerned that there is no mention of child protection matters other than in relation to those counsellors working with children and young people. All counsellors need to be familiar with, and abide by, the NI child protection procedures. They also need to ensure that they have up-to-date training in this area. This is important for all counsellors and not solely those working with children and young people aged under 18 years of age.
7. As a further point under the responsibility of counsellors, counsellors need to be aware that they may form part of a continuum of services to an individual. They need to be clear about the 'fit' of their service with others, in particular statutory services. There is a further issue for counsellors when working with an individual receiving statutory services that there should be proper liaison to ensure that the client receives the best possible service through enhanced communication. This is obviously not just the responsibility of the counsellor. A statutory agency which feels that the counsellor should form part of a care plan for a particular client, has a clear duty to liaise with the counsellor.
8. There is evidence of disparity between the remuneration of counsellors in private practice and those in employment or undertaking sessional work. It is important to ensure that there is a parity of quality across the range of settings. It is helpful that the standards outline arrangements for service user contact time as some counsellors particularly those working on a sessional basis may not currently be allocated a 50-60 minute session per client and able to offer adequate follow up to clients.
9. There needs to be clarity around arrangements for sessional counsellors (for example, those working in GP practices) in relation to insurance, etc.
10. There may be occasions when the client feels that they have not received a satisfactory service and wishes to make a complaint. Independent counsellors and organisations employing counsellors should have a facility that allows this to happen. There also needs to be a governance process to ensure that learning from complaints and any other incidents contributes to a constructive development of the service.

11. On a general note, Northern Ireland is an increasingly diverse society. Independent counsellors and organisations employing counsellors, need to be clear how they will offer a service that can reflect the cultural needs of the community. This potentially raises issues about the planning of services for non-English speaking clients as well as the accrediting of counsellors with qualifications obtained outside the UK or EU.
12. Whilst we accept that this document is limited to the setting of standards for counsellors, we do urge that it be viewed within the wider strategic framework of services that will provide for adequate provision of counselling services as part of an integrated health and social care system. The current changes under RPA appear to be a useful opportunity to review the commissioning and provision of counselling services.
13. In conclusion, the SHSSC supports the standards and looks forward to their adoption at an early stage.

January 2007