Practical guidance in setting up counselling and psychotherapy services
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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with BACP’s *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* in respect of fitness to practise.

Using Fact Sheet Resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. Resources are not contractually binding on members, but are intended to support practitioners by providing information and identifying questions and observations practitioners may need to ask themselves as they make ethical decisions within their practice in the context of the core ethical principles, values and personal moral qualities of BACP.

Specific issues in practice will vary depending on clients, particular models of working, the context of the work and the kind of therapeutic intervention provided. As specific issues arising from work with clients are often complex, BACP always recommends that you discuss practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consult a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the terms ‘practitioner’ and ‘counselling related services’ are used generically in a wider sense, to include the practice of counselling, psychotherapy, coaching and pastoral care. The terms ‘therapist’ or ‘counsellor’ are used to refer to those trained specifically as psychotherapists and counsellors.

Introduction

Setting up a counselling or psychotherapy service from scratch can be a daunting task.

For the initiators of the new counselling service there are many strategic and operational considerations to be discussed and decided on including ethical, financial and legal matters.

Practical matters such as premises, infrastructure, management and administration should be considered and decided alongside financial sustainability.
Stakeholder consultation may need to take place, and stakeholder engagement and ongoing obligations agreed.

The client ‘need’ will require identification and research in order to influence the services business model and drive out a sustainable plan to meet the need.

The service initiator will have decisions to make about becoming an employer, managing volunteers, and/or working with student placements. It is desirable to consider the provision of other professional services outside of the counselling professions e.g. HR specialists, accountancy services, marketing, legal services.

This Good Practice in Action resource (GPiA) resource is primarily for the initiators of a counselling or psychotherapy service (rather than practitioners preparing to work in private practice), whether they are considering setting up a service as a social enterprise or an agency (charitable or non charitable) and intending to employ staff or volunteers within that service. The initiator might be a group, an organisation or an individual.

The resource may also be useful for a recently formed counselling service as a self review resource, or for a service looking to expand. While it may be of interest for those looking to move towards an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) model, it does not cover those specific requirements and further information can be found at www.eapa.org.uk.

It aims to provide guidance on a wide range of considerations which can encourage discussion and debate by the future organisation. It acknowledges that solutions and outcomes will be specific to the service itself, its aims and objectives. The resource suggests that discussion and debate of these considerations are important not only in order to establish best practice for the service, but also vital for the ethical health of the service, the service users and its employees, volunteers and consultants.

The words ‘service’ or ‘organisation’ are used throughout meaning a counselling or psychotherapy service or services and uses the expression ‘service initiator’ or ‘initiator’ to refer to the person, persons or body responsible for setting up the service.

1. **The planning process**

In order to work and offer services safely and ethically, it is important to have a clear plan of how the service will operate prior to engaging with clients.
The initiator may wish to create their own framework within which the service will operate. Planning on a strategic and operational level should be emphasised in order to comply not only with the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* but with wide ranging legal requirements including mental health laws, Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO), the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

By doing so, the service initiator can create the shared structure as identified in the *Ethical Framework*; ‘…within which we all work but with the flexibility to respond to the needs of different contexts and client groups’ (EFfCP, Introduction).

### 2. Agreeing on a mission statement

A useful starting point in the planning process would be for the service initiator to establish the rationale for setting up the service in a clear and communicable way. Not only can this be considered best practice, but it provides a useful communication tool for the practitioners and supervisors who may be employed within the service and when communicating with stakeholders. Who is the service for? Why is it needed? What will it offer? Why now? Clear and concise answers to these questions will assist the service initiator in producing a brief informative statement on the service/organisation to be created.

Sometimes called a ‘statement of purpose,’ ‘strategic intent statement’ or a ‘mission statement’, these terminologies essentially provide the same thing.

The website smallbusiness.chron (https://smallbusiness.chron.com) describes the purpose as follows: ‘A mission statement is a short statement produced by an organisation that sums up its reason for being and its goals and principles. A mission statement tells the public and customers what they should expect when dealing with this organisation, and helps guide decisions by those within the organisation’.

Many initiators will, of course be familiar with this process. For those less familiar and for those seeking fresh ideas the websites of organisations within the mental wellbeing sector can be a good source of reference. The mission statement is often found within sections of their website entitled ‘About us’ or ‘strategy’ or ‘what we do’. As an example, the mental health charity MIND says ‘We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding’.
3. Stakeholders

Dependent on the size of the organisation, the service initiator may wish to consult with its stakeholders. The early identification of current and potential stakeholders is useful since many may have specific reporting obligations and requirements. The service can decide how it plans to meet these obligations, a discussion which may well influence decisions about staff roles.

Examples of stakeholders could be a local authority, grant providers, trustees, governors, ‘one off’ funders or occasional sponsors. There may be connections with community groups, local colleges and other providers of counselling services.

The organisation should also take a view on its position, as its clients are stakeholders in its operation.

4. Writing a business plan

Having established the mission statement determining the services’ strategic intents and consulting stakeholders, the organisation will want to turn next to the business plan. Within the counselling professions and to some practitioners, it may seem incongruent to introduce the very thought of a business plan.

It can be helpful in such situations to consider that a key purpose of having a business plan is to introduce a clear process of thinking, in order to maximise the chance of success and to plan how everything will work, and how it will be funded. Many funders, and banks will insist on seeing a business plan before committing finances to the venture. A business plan is also often the ‘go to’ document for the organisation if, as can often happen, the direction is temporarily lost when workloads rise. Referring back to the business plan often helps an organisation recalibrate and re-establish their purpose.

The components of the business plan will naturally vary according to the organisation being created. As an example, research can inform the type of services to be offered, which may be vital for one organisation but not required by another. Financial planning will be required by all in order to ascertain the sustainability of the service and minimise the risk of the service running out of money. Some components are discussed in the next section.
Some government agencies and organisations within the not-for-profit sector offer free advice and templates to assist the start-up initiator in the creation of a business plan. Examples can be found at www.smallcharities.org.uk, www.knowhownonprofit.org and www.gov.uk. If your counselling service is being set up as a new small charity then guidance can be found at: www.smallcharitysupport.uk.

5. Content of business plan

The information contained in this section is intended only as a guide for adaptation and inclusion in the business plan. It is not possible within this resource to identify every consideration but it is anticipated that the mission statement and strategic planning will help the service initiator in identifying topics relevant to their service.

5.1 The Service Model

The service model will describe the services available within the counselling service:

a. Will it offer long-term or time-limited counselling? Is it open to couples, children and young people or solely providing a service for individuals?

b. Will the service be specialist or offer specialisms e.g. substance misuse, counselling for veterans, those affected by illness, LGBTQ+ community, survivors of abuse?

c. What theoretical models or approaches will it offer?

d. What channels will the counselling be available through – face to face, telephone or online?

e. How will referrals be made, and where may they come from? Can clients self refer?

Good practice would also make clear here the fee structure, since not only does this ‘build an appropriate relationship’ with the client (Ethical Framework, Good practice, point 30) but will contribute to the financial planning of the organisation.
5.2 Where will it operate from?

a. One of the most significant costs to the organisation may be the cost of premises and the associated capital and revenue costs.

b. The organisation will want to carefully consider the financial implications of the premises to the organisation and if they can meet the operational and legal requirements, such as data protection, health and safety and insurances. Guidance on the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) and its implication for counsellors including a helpful self assessment toolkit can be found at www.ico.org.uk/for-organisations/register/self-assessment. See also Good Practice in Action Legal Resource 105: The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

c. The organisation will also wish to consider the premises suitability from the client perspective, including ease of access to the location, the building accessibility, the ability to provide a confidential environment and its suitability to deliver the intended service model e.g. does it have enough space if couples or group therapy is to be offered? Does it have ‘messy space’ if required for art therapy or creative workshops? Is it adequately insulated/soundproofed? Can it accommodate on-site supervision if required?

d. Staff welfare, safety and CPD should be considered, not just from the health and safety legislative perspective, but demonstrating duty of care in order for employees, volunteers, etc. to ‘take responsibility for care of self (Ethical Framework, Good Practice, point 91), by providing as an example adequate rest space. The adequacy of the premises with reference to supervision will also need to be considered if it is to be provided on site.

By considering these three points the service initiator can demonstrate their intention to Good Practice as noted in the Ethical Framework: ‘As members of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) we are committed to sustaining and advancing good practice’ (Good Practice, point 1).

5.3 People

Before devising an organisation structure, it is useful to decide whether or not the service intends to become an organisational member of BACP. If it does, it would be wise to research the requirements of membership and build these into the organisational structure. BACP’s application pack ‘An invitation to organisational membership’ provides helpful references.
As an example, there is a fundamental requirement for a ‘main contact person’ who will be ‘responsible for ensuring that BACP’s Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions, Articles of the Association regulations and Terms and Conditions are brought to the attention of, available to, and adhered to by all people providing services for and/or on behalf of the organisation’ (section 4, organisational membership application pack). This may be different from the person who has overall responsibility for the counselling service. Further information on becoming an organisational member, and to download the guide see: www.bacp.co.uk/membership/organisational-membership/.

In all circumstances the organisation will want to consider:

a. The number of counselling staff required to meet the anticipated client demand

b. The appropriate mix of qualified and ‘in training’ practitioners, volunteers and student placements

c. The recruitment criteria and methodology

d. Supervisory arrangements

e. The minimum standards and qualifications for all positions

f. The desirability of introducing an affiliate network.

Running parallel with the clinical set-up of the service, the service initiator will also want to decide on the managerial or non-clinical supervisory requirements of the service and the appropriate financial and administrative tasks that will enable the service to function effectively and work to professional standards.

Some of the above topics are covered in greater depth in other Good Practice in Action resources published by BACP. The service initiator may find Good Practice in Action 068 Fact Sheet: Record keeping within organisational settings in the counselling professions of use whilst 067 Commonly Asked Questions gives some practical advice in terms of record keeping. GPiA 009 Fact Sheet: How to choose a supervisor for your service will also help the new organisation in this key area. BACP members can download these, and other Good Practice in Action resources referred to in this resource at: https://www.bacp.co.uk/gpia.
5.4 Ethical credentials

Assuming that the organisation and many of its employees or volunteers are BACP members, the service will wish to adhere to the ethical principles, values, personal moral qualities and good practice standards set out within the *Ethical Framework*.

Whether you are setting up a new service, or reviewing an existing one, it may be important to demonstrate these ethical credentials not just to clients and staff but to stakeholders, funders and commissioners for example. Clear definition of roles e.g. clinical, managerial, administrative and financial is critical to a healthy operation. Where the size of the organisation dictates that some of these roles are shared e.g. managerial and administrative, there should be clarity within the organisation.

As a minimum, the service initiator may wish to use the following as a check list:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is there a policy and process in place?</th>
<th>Has responsibility and accountability been clearly defined and assigned to a person/team?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safeguarding clients and staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record keeping policy and process including GDPR compliance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision and monitoring of supervision</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision and monitoring of training and CPD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliant with employment law including HMRC guidance on self-employed or contractual status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliant with Health and Safety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client complaints’ procedure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff grievance and disciplinary procedure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equal opportunities policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy and procedure for client assessment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee vetting procedures, including DBS checks where appropriate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If the service is intending to join BACP as an organisational member it is worth noting that most of the above are a mandatory requirement.
5.5 Legal requirements

The nature of the service will drive the specific legal duties of the organisation and this should be thoroughly researched by the organisation.

Most, if not all services, will have a need to comply with employment law, health and safety, HMRC, equality and diversity and the data protection law of the time as identified through the Information Commissioner’s office (ICO). Useful agencies and organisations offering professional guidance have been identified earlier in this resource at Point 3 and Point 4.2a.

The service initiator will need to decide the most appropriate way to ensure compliance, either through utilising in-house expertise, or securing external professional services. It is considered advisable to consult and appoint legal representatives if establishing a company or a charity as part of the start-up process.

Further help is available in the Good Practice in Action legal resources. Good Practice in Action 029 provides a resource for counselling service providers in respect of legal issues relating to mental health.

Legal resources pertaining to specific client groups such as Children and Young People (CYP) specific settings (such as schools), Vulnerable Adults and other presenting issues are also available on the website.

5.6 Consideration of marketing and communications

It is anticipated that the service model and the financial plan will help the organisation answer the question “do I need to market the service?” and “can I afford to?” The nature of some services may mean that they are very discreet, and if the service operates entirely on referrals little marketing may be required. Some funding agreements may require the service to be confidential, and stakeholder expectations will need to be taken into account.

At the very least the organisation will need a name and, dependent on its status, one that is acceptable to Companies House, or the Charity Commission, its stakeholders and service users.

As any new organisation is likely to function with electronic mail, it will also need to secure a domain name, the availability of which often influences the name of the organisation. When using digital technology, good cyber security and clear policies on the use of digital technology are needed to ensure data protection.
Branding will need to be developed for use on most external communication. The development of brands, logos, letterheads, etc. will also need to meet legal requirements, such as the prominent display of the charity number, company number and/or postal address.

Most organisations will wish to create a social media presence, unless the nature of the organisation means it has no public persona. The creation of a website and the type of social media to be used can be linked back to the financial plan. What is needed in order to achieve the identified targets? Will service users find you by themselves or will you need to promote the service? Do funders or sponsors have an expectation to be recognised as such on websites and other external communications?

Will the service wish to generate press releases to promote the service? If so it will need to develop relationships with the press. How will the organisation ensure that this is handled ethically and protect clients’ confidentiality?

Securing the services of a marketing agency or specialist can be costly and the organisation will want to consider what funds are to be made available. It is not always necessary to pay an external expert. For example, there may well be in-house experience in the form of a Trustee or Director. Stakeholders may be willing to assist.

Dependent on geographical areas, there are often local workshops offered by businesses for community groups. Chambers of Commerce are often good sources of help and reference, as is an internet search of the topic. The popular business social network LinkedIn is a useful source of information for learning about marketing, some of which can be accessed at no cost at: https://www.linkedin.com/learning.

Traditional reference books are available. The popular book range ‘For Dummies’ regularly updates its series of books and can be useful for a novice, or for those branching out into a new marketing channel.

The list of titles can be found at www.dummies.com.

5.7 Financial projections

An important part of the business plan will be the financial projection. The nature of the service will dictate the complexity of the financial plan. However, all organisations will need to consider carefully the cost of running the service, where the income will come from, and what the expenditure is likely to be.
Numerous templates are widely available as free downloads to help an organisation establish an initial profit and loss projection. A simple profit and loss matrix can help establish the initial viability of the service, while a more detailed three to five-year projection will demonstrate sustainability. If the organisation intends to apply for grants or loans then in most cases, the organisation will need to submit such a projection.

Most templates require the organisation to estimate their expenditure costs for all of the topics mentioned in section 5: premises costs, people and staff welfare costs, costs associated with achieving high ethical credentials, what is likely to be spent on marketing in the first year. Consideration of the service model (5.1), as well as any stakeholder agreements, will allow the organisation to forecast its income in the first year.

For the organisation new to financial planning, or without ‘in-house’ expertise, it will be important to seek this expertise. This may come in the form of a Trustee or Director. Your bank may be able to assist with information and guidance. Some local authorities can signpost organisations to workshops on this matter, as can accountancy firms or local Chambers of Commerce.

The National Charity for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) offers templates, guidance and fact sheets, and while some are reserved for members only, some are widely available at: www.knowhow.ncvo.org.uk.

Templates are also available on the Government website at: https://www.gov.uk/write-business-plan and at www.smallbusiness.co.uk.

You will need to present your running costs, income source and projected expenditure as part of your business plan. Your bank may be able to assist with information and guidance on how to go about this process, and further information about writing a business plan, together with a free template, are also available on the Government website at: https://www.gov.uk/write-business-plan.
6. Reviewing the service

The final consideration covered in this resource is an annual review. However powerful the mission statement, and however thorough the business plan, it is highly likely that concessions will have to be made in the start-up process. Initiatives planned for year 1 may have to move out to year 2 or 3, or dropped altogether. It is important to acknowledge that this does not necessarily represent failure. What had seemed like a good idea at the time may no longer seem so, or be necessary or desirable. Stopping things as well as starting things can make the organisation more resilient to change and more sustainable.

It is considered good practice to undertake an annual review of the service – its finance, its people, its service model and its mission statement and to act on those findings.

Summary

While setting up a counselling service from scratch can be daunting, it can also be hugely rewarding.

• By following a logical process, the service initiator is more likely to have considered all aspects of the task while committing to the principles and values set out in the Ethical Framework.

• Being clear on the overall objective – the mission statement and strategic objectives – and writing a business plan to convey how the organisation plans to achieve those objectives will undoubtedly increase the possibility of success. By doing so the service initiator can demonstrate their commitment to working to professional standards, putting the clients first and maintaining the integrity of the work, as set out in the Ethical Framework: ‘our commitment to clients’. Having an easily accessed document also enables the service initiator and all those involved in the organisation to recognise that success – to know when they have got there!

• Setting time aside to access the summaries of the Good Practice in Action resources and identifying those most relevant to the service are also recommended. These summaries can be accessed from the list of resources at: https://www.bacp.co.uk/gpia/.

By taking this approach, the service initiator can create their own framework; this: ‘creates a shared structure within which we all work but with the flexibility to respond to the needs of different contexts and client groups’ (EFFCP Introduction).
Finally, it is important to consider the care of self. If the service initiator is an experienced practitioner, they are likely to be well versed in the need of self care.

Keeping a healthy work/life balance is an often-heard phrase. The Ethical Framework asks that practitioners take responsibility for their own wellbeing and monitor and maintain psychological and physical health in order to be 'sufficiently resilient and resourceful to undertake our work in ways that satisfy professional standards' (Good practice, point 91b). Further information can also be found in Good Practice in Action 088 Self-care in the counselling professions and 094 Fitness to practise.

About the author

Judith Gentry is a freelance author based in North Devon. She coaches and advises small businesses and sole traders in start-up and growth. Her earlier career was in retail and retail consultancy before discovering the world of counselling and psychotherapy. She is a Registered Member MBACP and holds a Bachelor of Science degree with First Class Honours in Reflective Therapeutic Practice. She was a founding member of BACP’s Coaching Division in 2010. She is Chair of Trustees of the Burton Art Gallery and Museum in Bideford, North Devon.

References and further reading


BACP Good Practice in Action resources available from: https://www.bacp.co.uk/gpia [accessed 31 Dec 2018]

