

Guidance for trainee placements

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T3

Information Sheet

Introduction

1. These guidelines derive from two other guideline documents, Guidelines for Client Work, Training Placements and Supervision in Counsellor Training Courses (Revised Edition March 1999),¹ and Accountability for the Supervised Counselling Practice undertaken by Trainees on BAC Accredited Counselling Courses (March 1999),² which were originally written for use in relation to the accreditation of counsellor training courses. It was, though, recognised from the beginning that the principles enshrined in these documents, together with the substance of the booklet 'Accreditation of Training Courses' (revised 2002),³ applied beyond the boundaries of the Course accreditation scheme to the general provision of good practice in counsellor training.

2. Evidence of competence to practise with real clients is an essential outcome of counsellor training. It is therefore also essential that trainees on courses have the opportunity for a substantial amount of appropriately contracted and supervised counselling practice with real clients, as distinct from the use of counselling skills within another primary role. 100 hours of direct client work, exclusive of missed sessions, should be regarded as the minimum acceptable during the training period; more is preferable. Trainees should have the experience of making, maintaining and terminating contracts with clients.

3. Two fundamental ethical principles govern the gaining of counselling experience. The first is the safety of both clients and trainees. The second is that the needs of clients are paramount. Should there, for example, arise a conflict of interest in relation to more narrowly defined training needs, such as the number of counselling hours required, or that the client work should demonstrate a particular area of theory, this needs to be borne in mind.

4. It is not good practice for inexperienced trainees to gain their client counselling experience through private/independent practice. Trainees will, therefore, normally need a placement in a reputable agency that offers a counselling service. Such placements are in considerable demand and, under the financial and other pressures of training, it is understandable that trainees are sometimes tempted to settle for the first available placement without really checking that it is appropriate for their particular circumstances or training course. At the very least this can undermine the effectiveness and enjoyment of a trainee's training experience; at worst the placement becomes an unsafe experience for both trainees and clients.

5. Trainees should allow time for the process of finding a placement; they will need also to realise that, even within an otherwise suitable placement, the supply of appropriate client work, or their own progress towards competence, cannot be certain or completely predictable. They are advised to allow,



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in their financial and other planning, for at least the possibility of having to extend the training period in order to complete the required number of practice hours and to achieve the necessary level of competence.

6. It is increasingly likely that placement experience may be sought, not only by 'beginning' trainees, but also by people who have completed their formal training course, but who wish to extend their practice experience and prepare for accreditation or registration. There are a number of common principles that both trainees and placement agencies need to take into account when negotiating arrangements. There are also other factors that may vary according to the experience of the person on placement.

Kinds of placement agency

1. Some agencies are well used to having trainees and may have come to rely on them. Nevertheless it is important that the special needs of trainees, in relation to case load, kind of client and appropriate managerial and other support are fully recognised and taken into account. Pre-assessment of clients as being suitable for trainees is desirable whenever possible, though this may present difficulties in respect of some theoretical orientations. Some placements, such as those in medical and some educational settings, may not be suitable for inexperienced trainees; for these BACP's specialist faculty or divisions have produced separate guidelines which both agencies and potential trainees are advised to consult in advance of trying to negotiate a placement.

2. If an agency has not previously taken trainees on placement this is not necessarily a contra-indication, but there could well be teething problems and such a setting may not suit inexperienced trainees in a first placement. There will be a special need for the clarification of mutual requirements and expectations, not least the nature of the triangular relationship between trainee, placement and training course.

3. It is important to establish from the start that an agency can provide formal counselling contracts as distinct from opportunities to use counselling skills. It is also important to ascertain whether the agency has any specific requirements or practices, such as a limit on the number of sessions that may be offered, and, if so, to check whether these are compatible with the requirements of the training course or the accreditation scheme of a professional body.

4. Some agencies specialise in a particular kind of work, or work with a specific range of clients (e.g. young people), or clients with specific presenting problem(s), for example bereavement. Such placement opportunities are often very valuable, but where they have imposed some limitation on an individual trainee's experience, it is important that this is recognised. An automatic generalisation to other kinds of work and clients should not be assumed and needs for further experience and training should be identified.

5. The issue of theoretical orientation can be more problematic. It is important that the orientation of the agency is compatible with that of a training course, but opinions vary as to whether this implies that the orientations should actually be identical or whether some difference can be helpfully stimulating and challenging, particularly for more experienced trainees. The needs of clients are again paramount, and if challenge becomes confusion and conflict, this is not helpful and needs to be avoided, for it is likely to 'spill over' into the actual client work. Where the training course and/or the agency are committed to and work from a single and particular theoretical model it will be important that it is the same model.

The initial negotiation between placement agency and trainee

1. Training courses vary as to whether they or their trainees take the initiative in finding suitable placements for client work, though it is strongly recommended that training courses work to build relationships with agencies so that they are in a position to offer more help to trainees.

2. In any case the training course management should take responsibility for approving the placement as appropriate for the particular course. As part of this process they should provide the agency with a written description of the course including its orientation and requirements for client work and assessment. The agency should agree in writing that these are congruent with its aims, procedures and resources.

3. Training courses should also take responsibility for assessing trainees individually for their readiness to begin client work, though many agencies are likely to have their own selection requirements and procedure. At the least, a reciprocal interview between trainee and agency is indicated; where possible it is also helpful for potential

trainees to be given the opportunity to talk to those currently or formerly on the placement.

The on-going agreement between trainee, agency and course

1. It is important that trainees, agencies and courses are all able to make available sufficient time and resources as are necessary to facilitate the placement activity and good communications within it. Estimates of what will be required should be negotiated and agreed in advance of the start of the placement period. Though review may become necessary it is important that, if possible, the goal posts and conditions are not changed mid-placement.

2. There should be an explicit written agreement between trainees, the placement agency and the training course, which is available to all. The precise content of such agreements will vary but they will always need to include and clarify the following issues (which can be contentious and which are dealt with more fully below):

- Accountability for the counselling work.
- Supervision arrangements.
- Assessment requirements.
- Confidentiality issues.

3. Good practice requires that the agreement also addresses:

- The contact expected between course and agency e.g. reciprocal feedback, meetings.
- Explanation of course and placement equal opportunities policies.
- Clarification of details of the agency's professional practice such as the initial assessment of clients, methods of referral to trainee counsellors, note taking/record keeping conventions or requirements.
- Specific attention needs to be paid to the kinds of counselling contracts offered and any limits upon these in relation to trainee experience or other factors.

4. If a training course is part of an institution with its own clinic or counselling service the substance of paragraphs 2 and 3 of this section still requires internal clarification.

Accountability for the counselling work

1. The need for a clear accountability pathway for the supervised counselling practice undertaken by trainees

has become increasingly important. Its purpose is the safety of clients but it also encompasses a care for the vulnerable position of trainees. These accountability issues are professionally and legally complex and need to be addressed in advance. Course providers and placement agencies are advised to take advice on their particular situation. Paragraphs 2–5 of this section cannot, therefore, prescribe a particular accountability pathway; their intention is to identify principles that will need to be taken into account.

2. Trainees, training courses and placement agencies all need to be working according to the BACP requirements on ethical practice (Ethical Framework).⁴ It is a function of the training process that trainees become increasingly accountable and responsible for their counselling practice.

3. Clinical responsibility for an agency's work normally resides with the agency, but the involvement of training providers and supervisors external to the agency needs to be clarified, to avoid confusion over where accountability lies, particularly if things go wrong. It is good practice to have formal procedures and agreements to resolve any difficulties.

4. A placement agency may require that trainees should be individual members of BACP, in which case best practice would be that the agency should also be an organisational member. If individual membership is not required of trainees then the placement agency will need to hold itself formally accountable for the counselling work undertaken by trainees, including the right of access for clients to professional conduct procedures. The alternative adopted should be clarified in a written agreement, which must also clarify how the trainee is covered for the purposes of professional indemnity insurance.

5. The pathway(s) for complaint and support should also be clarified in this agreement. A placement agency should have a published complaints procedure which should clarify the distinction between complaints made by clients against counselling practice in relation to ethical standards, and complaints that clients, or trainees, make that centre on aspects of an agency's service delivery. If trainees are individually subject, by reason of membership, to an external professional body's complaint procedure, then the issue of appropriate support during any complaint process should be clarified. If trainees are not subject to such a procedure, but a

complaint is made and upheld against their work, then internal processes are necessary to facilitate appropriate communication with the training provider, and further action as necessary in relation to the trainee.

Supervision arrangements

1. The current guideline for counsellors in training is for not less than one hour of presenting in supervision to eight client hours including missed sessions. All cases must be supervised. A trainee's supervisory contract should be for a frequency not less than fortnightly, and should include the provision of access to alternative consultative resources, if necessary, during breaks. The guiding principle should be the nature and complexity of the client work relative to the experience of a trainee rather than compliance with a minimum. Furthermore, trainees should realise that for client work to count subsequently towards BACP individual accreditation it must have been supervised in accordance with accreditation requirements, currently a minimum of one and a half hours presenting time per month, regardless of the volume of client work undertaken. When supervision is undertaken in a group the understanding of the presenting time for accreditation purposes is half the total group time subject to a maximum group size of four people (excluding the supervisor); for groups larger than this the previous ratio, group time divided by the number of persons in the group, applies.

2. Supervisors should be experienced practitioners who have ideally completed some training in supervision and/or have had considerable experience of supervisory work. Their theoretical orientation should be compatible with that of the training course.

3. The Supervision of trainees can be provided in different ways: individually and/or in a group, by the placement agency, by the training course, or by a supervisor external to both course and placement. In either of the two latter cases it should be clarified as to where primary accountability lies and permission must be given by the agency for its client work to be presented in external supervision settings. It would be good practice to have formal procedures and agreements to resolve any difficulties.

4. The written agreement on supervision arrangements between trainee, course and agency should include accountability issues as above, but also reporting, assessment and confidentiality requirements. The detail

of these may vary with the theoretical orientation of the course and the implications of this for the issue of confidentiality in the supervisory relationship. Notwithstanding this, the agreement should always include provision of a channel whereby a supervisor can fulfil a responsibility to communicate serious or unresolvable concerns about a trainee's ethical practice or fundamental safety/competence. The agreement should also cover general liaison issues and finance; it should be clear whether a trainee is required to pay a supervision fee extra to the course fee, and whether supervisors are paid separately for reports and if so, by whom.

Assessment requirements

1. A training course should make clear to a placement agency its assessment requirements, as it is sometimes possible that these cannot be met by a particular agency. In this instance a training agreement between agency and course/trainee cannot be made. It is particularly undesirable if difficulties emerge only after the commencement of a placement.

2. The most likely sources of conflict lie in the degree of supervisory or other reporting on trainee progress, that is expected, or required, and/or when a course may require evidence of practitioner competence through audio or videotaping of actual client sessions, and the agency (or indeed an individual client) will not permit this.

Confidentiality issues

These will be of 2 kinds, those pertaining to the carrying out of the client work and those pertaining to a trainee. Both must be clarified in advance of the placement.

1. Client work confidentiality should be governed by the Ethical Framework,⁴ plus any additional requirements/policies of the agency. The onus for confidentiality should be with the placement agency and contracted with the trainee. A clear understanding of the issues of confidentiality should be established between the training agency, the college and the trainee. A trainee will need to accept these before starting the placement. Any potential source of conflict should, as far as possible, be anticipated and clarified at this point. It follows, obviously, that the agency must have clear, written and accessible procedures.

2. It is important that trainees working in agencies

should have access to managerial and other supervisory support, especially if the main source of consultative supervision is outside the agency. In particular, special attention should be paid to what may be called ethical dilemmas, such as the limits of confidentiality that arise in respect of the reporting of abuse, medical and/or psychiatric consultation, work in multidisciplinary teams and under multidisciplinary management, and with clients who may present material which is suggestive of a danger to themselves and others. It is in these sorts of situations that the procedures for liaison between the practitioner, agency personnel, training course and any external supervisors are put to the test.

3. Additionally, permission should always be negotiated, and anonymity safeguarded, in relation to the presentation of agency work to a training course or other external supervisor, the fulfilment of training assessment requirements including the writing of case histories, research and of course in respect of any subsequent publication.

4. It will be important to identify and clarify as part of the written agreement between trainee, course and agency the channels for reciprocal feedback, including formal reporting on a trainee's competence, if this is required. But there will also need to be agreement on the limits of such contact in respect of a trainee's personal material.

Conclusion

The above paragraphs have sought to address the issues that have most commonly become areas of confusion and conflict. These are not exhaustive, and the counselling and psychotherapy profession and the external world in which it is being practised are rapidly changing and developing. Courses, trainees and placements are therefore advised to review their thinking and practice at regular intervals, with the aim of identifying gaps and of amending and developing their existing processes.

References

1. Guidelines for Client Work, Training Placements and Supervision in Counsellor Training Courses. Rugby: BACP; revised 1999.
2. Accountability for the Supervised Counselling Practice Undertaken by Trainees on BAC Accredited Training Courses. Rugby: BACP; 1999.
3. British Association for Counselling. Accreditation of Training Courses. Rugby: BACP; 2002.
4. BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy. Rugby: BACP; 2002.

Additional guidance for trainees in specific work settings is available in:

AUCC Guidelines for University and College Counselling Services (2004) BACP: Rugby.

Good Practice Guidance for Counselling in Schools (2001) BACP: Rugby.

Information Sheet DG3, FHCP Guidance on Good Practice for the Management of Counselling Placements in Healthcare Settings (2001) BACP: Rugby.

Information Sheet DG11, FHCP Guidance for Good Practice for the Management of Post Graduate Trainee Counsellor Placements in NHS Settings (2003) BACP: Rugby.

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It should be noted that this Information Sheet offers broad guidance, which sets out industrial good practice, but it should not be substituted for legal and for other professional advice applicable to your particular circumstances.