

Description of HCS

The Hitchin Counselling Service officially opened in December 1993. Counselling is available and free to Hitchin residents and to residents of Hitchin's surrounding villages. Clients must be over 18 years old. HCS policy is to offer all clients open-ended contracts.

Our service is normally made up of two Administrators, ten to fourteen Counsellors, seven or eight Supervisors, and a Steering Committee of five or six, which includes a link member from the Supervisors' group. All service members are non-paid volunteers, including the Administrators.

Some counsellors start as students on placement from Diploma in Counselling courses, but many stay with the service beyond this required time. Others apply to us post-graduation in order to acquire practice hours for accreditation.

If a student fails to complete a year or is suspended, even temporarily, from a course, her/his Supervisor must immediately be notified and arrangements made towards an appropriate ending with the student's client. The client can, after an appropriate break, choose to see another Counsellor.

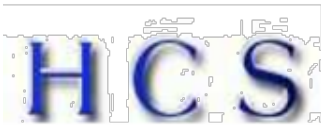
Counsellors receive routine supervision commensurate with their experience. In general our service provides one hour of individual supervision fortnightly. We attempt to match counsellors and supervisors in accordance with their theoretical orientations.

As part of our application procedure all Counsellors and Supervisors sign a statement concerning any arrests, convictions or offences.

Supervisors and Steering Committee members are usually recruited by existing volunteers who have a strong belief in a free counselling service, and so approach contacts and colleagues who are like-minded. We also receive many applications from post-graduate students on supervision courses requiring practice hours as Supervisors.

Prospective clients applying to the service are not interviewed prior to seeing a Counsellor. Our intake and assessment process is as follows:

- a) After initial contact, the Administrator forwards an application form, along with other information about the service.
- b) On receipt of the application, the Administrator carefully checks the application for obvious deterrents to our ability to offer counselling to this applicant. The Administrator is fully conversant with HCS policies and requirements. If there are any deterrents, he or she will advise the client of the reasons for our inability to offer counselling.
- c) Each application is reviewed by an experienced Supervisor.
- d) When a counsellor has a vacancy, the Administrator will forward a copy of the application to the designated Counsellor and to their Supervisor.
- e) The Counsellor reads the application to determine whether there is any reason as to why it would not be appropriate for her/him to act as Counsellor to this particular



person, for example, if this person is known to them in any capacity, or for any other reason.

- f) In the event that the Supervisor is not fully satisfied with some aspect of the application, she/he may discuss it further within a Supervisors' meeting and with the Counsellor.
- g) The Counsellor and Supervisor discuss the application together, in a Supervision session. If they accept the application, the Counsellor notifies the Administrator of their acceptance. The Administrator notifies the applicant and sets up the first counselling session.
- h) The Counsellor then offers the client up to four assessment sessions, after which, in conjunction with the supervisor, a decision is made between the Counsellor and client as to whether or not to enter into a formal Counselling arrangement. If a contract is made, the Supervisor then regularly meets with the Counsellor for fortnightly Supervision sessions.
- i) Counsellors and clients are not normally alone in the building. Arrangements are made so that there are other members of the organization present. Counsellors support each other in this system on their allocated counselling times. In the rare cases of lone working, additional procedures are in place to ensure the safety of the client and counsellor.

Our service has a strong informal support culture which enables members to contact each other in between meetings, with any concerns of immediacy. It is important to note that this does not appear to undermine the formal structure of the organization.

In addition, our formal 'holding' process consists of the following:

- We are members of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and adhere to its Ethical Framework. We also have a formal Governing Document; Equal Opportunities policy and Health and Safety, Grievance and Complaints Procedures. All members of HCS are also covered by professional Indemnity Insurance.
- As part of our linking process, at least one member of the Supervisors' group attends the Steering Committee meetings.
- The Client Administrator attends the business part of the Supervisors' meetings and leaves for the second part, when supervisees and clients are discussed. He also has a link person from the Supervisors' group for help and emergency use between Supervisors' meetings.
- The service usually provides two whole day training events each year. We also arrange whole service meetings to provide further opportunity for support, to discuss service issues and policy, and to celebrate our accomplishments.