

Counselling placements: a trainer's guide

**Good Practice in Action 079
Fact Sheet**

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Context

This resource is one of a suite prepared by BACP to enable members to engage with the BACP *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*.

Using Fact Sheet Resources

BACP members have a contractual commitment to work in accordance with the current *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. The Fact Sheet resources are not contractually binding on members but are intended to support practitioners by providing general information on principles and policy applicable at the time of publication, 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 discussion of practice dilemmas with a supervisor and/or consulting a suitably qualified and experienced legal or other relevant practitioner.

In this resource, the word 'therapist' is used to mean specifically counsellors and psychotherapists and 'therapy' to mean specifically counselling and psychotherapy. Trainer to mean any organisation providing counselling training and placement provider to describe an organisation providing placements for trainees on counselling training placements and 'trainee' describes any student undertaking a qualification level counselling course.

Introduction

All trainees in professional counselling training are required to complete a required number of supervised hours working with clients. Typically this takes the form of a voluntary 'placement' within an organisation or agency. This is in addition to the role play counselling sessions practised in class with other trainees. The hours on placement count towards the client facing hours required by the training course.

This Good Practice in Action (GPiA) resource is primarily for trainers or tutors when providing information and references to guide the trainee through the placement journey. It defines the responsibilities of the trainer or training centre. (See Good Practice in Action 090 for information for

trainees about placements, and 082 in respect of organisations offering placements). This fact sheet adopts the word 'trainer' throughout to cover the roles of trainer, tutor or training centre and the word 'placement provider' to include an organisation, charity, or agency within which the placement sits.

It considers the role of the trainer in communicating the course requirements regarding placements, in overseeing and guiding the trainee in applying for a placement and identifies the ongoing duty of care throughout the process. It discusses topics such as the trainee's readiness to practise, monitoring throughout the course, and how to prepare the trainee for endings.

1 The Placement Journey

The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* states that trainers have a responsibility to their trainees not only for competent teaching but to 'model high levels of good practice in their work' (Good Practice, point 79). This high level of good practice could be modelled throughout assisting the trainee through the stages of 'the placement journey' as outlined in this resource.

2 Providing trainees with appropriate information from the outset

Trainers should ensure that prior to enrolling on a course the trainee fully understands the requirements regarding placements. Many trainees' first instinct is to focus on the 'number of hours needed' and the trainer should take care that material is provided from the outset that explains this requirement but also sets it in the context of the overall training.

The number of placement hours will vary between courses. Trainees on accredited courses for example are likely to have a more defined set of criteria regarding placements than a non-accredited course. The modality of the training may also have an influence on placements.

Trainees should be made aware that to become a full member of a professional body such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) or UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), they need to have completed a course which includes a defined number of clinical placement hours with appropriate supervision.

It is important that course providers form collegiate relationships with the trainees' placement providers. This enhances the trainees' learning experience and can help identify any areas of difficulty or concern from the candidate's practice in good time. Maintaining consistent and effective communication between course provider, supervisor and placement provider throughout the duration of the course is vital as there is a commitment within the *Ethical Framework* to collaborate to ensure that the trainee's work satisfies professional standards. (See Good Practice, point 66; and Good Practice in Action 082 Fact Sheet: *Counselling placements: an organisation's guide* for more information.)

The competent trainer could also explain:

- at what stage in the training (year, term) the subject of placements will be introduced
- whether the training centre provides 'internal' placements (where a course has its own counselling service for example) or if external placements will need to be secured
- if an external placement is to be sought, clarifying whose responsibility it will be to secure it. If it is to be the responsibility of the trainee, (as is often the case) the trainee should be aware of this, and how they may go about it
- Is there a procedure in place for trainees to extend the training period to complete the required practice hours? This is a requirement for all BACP accredited training courses (B4.2, *Accreditation of Training Courses 5th edition*, 2012)
- if the trainee may incur additional costs through their placements (e.g. supervision; professional indemnity insurance; travel costs).

By providing the above, the trainer can comply with the *Ethical Framework*, which says that 'any information about the teaching, education or learning opportunities being provided will be accurate and enable potential trainees to make an informed choice' (Good Practice, point 75.)

Understanding *the purpose* of placements also forms part of the trainers' responsibility to provide appropriate information. Trainers may wish to include, and expand on, some of the following:

- that by applying their learning in an environment that is 'congruent with the rationale and philosophy of the course' (B4.1 iii, *Accreditation of Training Courses, 5th edition*, 2012) the trainee can gain contextual understanding to the classroom taught modules.
- that in addition to practising and refining a therapeutic approach they can gain a practical understanding of ethical, legal, social, professional, and organisational practice.

- that the trainee can gain valuable experience and confidence and prepare themselves for working in the profession.
- that the trainee can build a 'network' of contacts that may assist them in any employment search post qualification.

Some important things to bear in mind when finding an appropriate placement are that:

- the placement provider will be required to meet appropriate Health and Safety criteria
- trainees should never be expected to work alone or unsupported while on placement
- although voluntary placements are not included within the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, good placement providers will be committed to equality, diversity and inclusion within placement opportunities and should work with trainees in respect of reasonable adjustments that may be needed.

3 Challenges

In *An introduction to Counselling and Psychotherapy: From theory to practice*, Reeves says, 'Often the most stressful aspect of the practice placement is finding one; they remain scarce' (page 45). Trainers will be aware that the struggle to secure a placement can indeed cause significant anxiety because of the requirement for placement hours in order to 'pass the course'.

Trainees may write about this struggle in their learning logs or journals, share with peers or voice it during group lessons at 'check in'. Others may choose to use their personal therapy sessions to explore their feelings. Others may not share, and at worse, the pursuit of a placement can overwhelm the trainee and impact on their ability to engage with the training.

Trainers will wish to bear in mind the duty of care and the personal moral quality of care as presented in the *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*, which describes care as 'benevolent, responsible and competent attentiveness to someone's needs, wellbeing and personal agency' (Personal Moral Qualities, point 12).

Trainers will also wish to acknowledge the additional difficulties that trainees with disabilities might face when looking for placements. Trainers can support and encourage them to identify any reasonable adjustments that would help them in their search for a suitable placement, and where needed work with placement providers to ensure issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion issues are addressed.

4 Advantages and disadvantages of multi-placements

Trainers would be well advised to encourage their trainees to consider a range of placement providers since competition for places can be fierce.

Some trainees may find themselves needing to take up more than one placement. When guiding the trainee, the trainer could consider the positives and potential negatives for this approach. Some of these could be that the trainee:

- is more likely to achieve the required placement hours within the given timeframe by having more than one placement
- can gain from working in different placement environments and client groups, enrich their training experience and give them insight into their future as a professional
- will have an increased time commitment by having more than one placement and that this may impact negatively dependent on their personal circumstances and wellbeing. Each placement should offer induction training, supervision and meetings with placement provider or manager, all of which will have significant time implications. Some trainees may see the placement hours' requirement as a task to complete as soon as possible, whereas development as a practitioner may need to evolve over time and it is important that attention is also given to self-care in order to maintain their wellbeing
- will need to secure reports from each of the placement providers to add to their 'portfolio'.

And that:

- policies and procedures, including record keeping may vary between placement providers and carry different workloads.

Although there are positives to multi placements they can put an extra burden on the trainee.

5 Readiness to practise

The trainer, when guiding the trainee, will no doubt note that some trainees are ready to take up a placement before others. In *Making the most of counselling and psychotherapy placements* Oldale and Cooke talk of the role of the trainer, along with the supervisor as a 'gatekeeper to the profession' and go on to say that 'it is their professional responsibility to consider whether ultimately, the person in training is sufficiently competent to begin working with clients' (Oldale and Cooke (2015)).

The trainer will have a number of resources, both formal and informal to draw on when assessing a trainee's competency levels and readiness to practise. These may include:

- observation during triad or group practice sessions.
- essays, reports and presentations completed by the trainee that demonstrate professional, ethical and personal development appropriate to the course requirement.
- a trainee's journal or learning log that can give the trainer insight into the trainee's current self-awareness.
- individual and/or group tutorials.

6 Evidencing competency levels

Accredited courses are required to formally assess readiness to practise. Non-accredited courses may not be required to do so; however, a trainer may consider the advantages to the trainee of such an approach.

Evidencing readiness to practise, either through a letter or an assessment report can give the trainee assistance with their placement search. Oldale and Cooke (2015) talk of evidencing the personal, the theoretical and ethical knowledge of the trainee in addition to understanding their motivation to become a counsellor as part of any assessment.

It should be noted that striving to achieve a 'pass' can increase a trainee's anxiety concerning placements generally, and it will be helpful for trainees to know that a delay in getting confirmation of competency levels does not mean that they will be a poor counsellor.

7 Guiding the trainee on appropriate placements

In addition to noting readiness to practise and competency levels, the trainer has a duty of care to offer guidance on appropriate placements. The *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* commits practitioners to 'working within [their] competence' (Our commitment to clients, point 2a) and says that: 'We must be competent to deliver the services being offered to at least fundamental professional standards or better' (Good Practice, point 13). Trainees who are student members of BACP also have a number of responsibilities as outlined within Good Practice, points 81-83, this includes a commitment to '...deliver services that satisfy the minimum professional standards' (Good Practice, point 83b).

When discussing 'appropriate placements' with the trainee, the trainer should consider the trainee as an individual, the type of training they are undertaking, and the client group served by the intended placement.

BACP accredited courses make clear the 'requirement that the client work undertaken by the trainee should be congruent with the rationale and philosophy of the course' (point B4.1 iii, *Accreditation of Training Courses 5th ed*, 2012).

There are other specific examples to consider:

Many course providers insist that trainees undertake placements with adult clients in generic settings. However, if the training provider permits placements in agencies who work with particular client groups, there is a need to ensure that the trainee is competent to practise in this setting. For example, in order to work with children and young people (CYP), it is essential for the training provider, or the placement service provider, to ensure that the trainee has been assessed as having the basic competences to practise safely and ethically with this client group. This would include for example, a good working knowledge of safeguarding procedures and child protection legislation such as ethical and legal issues concerning capacity and consent, knowledge of child and adolescent development and the ability to communicate appropriately with CYP.

The trainer will need to consider which elements are to be provided by the course content, and/or the placement provider. For BACP accredited courses there is a responsibility for the training provider to ensure that this meets BACP's requirements. See www.bacp.co.uk/membership/organisational-membership/course-accreditation/student-placements-with-children-and-young-people/ for more information on student placements with children and young people.

There are a number of BACP Good Practice in Action (GPiA) resources regarding working with CYP and these can be accessed at: www.bacp.co.uk/gpia.

Working online rather than face to face is not usually considered suitable for a core training placement unless the training is specifically in this medium.

Practising online 'is not usually recommended for novice or inexperienced practitioners or those in training without focused ongoing support and guidance from expert specialists in the field'. See Good Practice in Action 047 *Working online* and Good Practice in Action 040 *Social media (audio and video)* and competence frameworks and curricula suggested for telephone and e-counselling, which can be downloaded at: www.bacp.co.uk/events-and-resources/ethics-and-standards/competences-and-curricula.

Furthermore, the author, Bond says 'Good practice requires that anyone making significant differences in their practice should give careful consideration to what will be involved and have taken adequate steps to be competent in the new ways of working before offering services to clients' (Good Practice in Action 047: *Working online*). We can draw from this that online therapy while no longer a new way of working would not be an appropriate placement for a trainee not training specifically in this area. The use of digital technology for peripheral activity, such as contacting clients by email, text, or other social media needs to comply with data protection legislation. Further information about data protection can be found within Good Practice in Action 105 Legal Resource: *The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)*.

8 Courses and placements with specific requirements

The trainer should ensure that they are working within the awarding body requirements and guiding the trainee in a similar fashion.

It has already been said that a BACP accredited course will have specific requirements regarding placements as set out in section B of '*Accreditation of training courses – 5th edition*' (sometimes referred to as 'the gold book').

Requirements will vary between courses, but all are likely to have specific requirements about supervision, and many may have a requirement to have a three or four-way contract between the trainee, the placement provider, the course and the supervisor. Members make a commitment within the *Ethical Framework* to be '...watchful for any potential contractual incompatibilities between agreements with our clients and any other contractual agreements applicable to the work being undertaken...' (Good Practice, point 31f), so even if the awarding body does not state this, it is considered good practice for the placement to stipulate a three or four-way contract.

Some placement providers will also have specific requirements – for example some will not accept trainees until a specific stage in training has been achieved and without evidence of competency levels. Placement providers often require references independent of the training provider.

Finally in this section, the trainer should note that the *Ethical Framework* requires them to 'inform clients (or ensure that clients have been informed) that they are trainees' (Good Practice, point 82a).

9 Practical help

As mentioned earlier, trainee anxiety around securing a placement is a common occurrence. The pressure to 'get a placement' can overwhelm and detract from the overall intent and purpose.

Competition for placements can be extremely fierce and the trainee should be encouraged to approach the topic with the tenacity and professionalism of a job application.

As an example, many external placement providers will have set criteria such as a 'person specification', an example of which is shown below:

Person specification	Criteria met
Being on a specific level course for at least six months	yes/no
Having evidence from trainer of readiness to practise	yes/no
Having personal therapy or planning to start within a short period of time	yes/no
Trainee membership of BACP or equivalent	yes/no
Able to supply referees unconnected with the training	yes/no
Able to commit to certain number of hours a week for up to 45 weeks a year	yes/no
Willingness to continue as a volunteer for an agreed period once those required for training purposes have been completed	yes/no

The trainer should consider setting aside appropriate time to provide trainees with support and guidance on how to apply to or approach a potential placement provider, and the methodology for doing so.

This practical help could include:

- the provision of a list of possible placements with whom the trainer has built a relationship and sees as appropriate to the training course and its trainees
- inviting potential placement providers to visit the course and talk to trainees about the services they provide
- tasking trainees to research local placement opportunities and present their findings to their peers
- inviting in prior-year trainees to talk about and share their experiences of placements
- development of mentors from prior-year trainees as 'sounding boards'
- developing an ongoing relationship with placement providers to ensure continuity and a good choice of placements for trainees
- exploring the opportunity, need or potential for providing an in-house placement subject to course approval
- including CV and application writing as part of the course, updating CVs to make them relevant to counselling placements
- preparing for interviews by setting up mock or practice interviews.

10 Endings

While a significant amount of time and energy is put into teaching about endings in the therapeutic relationship and within the context of the *Ethical Framework*, there is often less consideration given to placement endings. In preparing the trainee to undertake client work safely and ethically, it would be useful for the trainer to guide the trainee regarding ethical placement endings.

Whilst a placement will normally have a particular length, and an anticipated end date which can be prepared for, an ending can also occur for a number of reasons including:

- the trainee not wishing to continue in the placement
- the placement provider wishing to end the placement with the trainee
- the placement provider ceasing to exist, for example because funding has ceased, or client demand has fallen below sustainable levels

- the trainee may 'achieve' their practice hours and does not wish (or has not agreed) to continue to work voluntarily
- the trainee has completed the training course
- contraindications prevent a trainee from continuing in practice.

The trainer will need to be aware of these and other possibilities. If robust three or four-way meetings are in place between the trainee, the supervisor, the placement provider (and sometimes the trainer), most unscheduled endings can be avoided.

In guiding the trainee through any of the possible ending scenarios shown above, the trainer has several aspects to consider.

The trainee is required to apply the *Ethical Framework* during their placement, making each client '...the primary focus of our attention and our work during our sessions together' (Good Practice, point 7) and build an appropriate relationship by giving '...careful consideration to how we reach agreement with clients and will contract with them about the terms on which our services will be provided' (Good Practice, point 31).

Therefore, it is clear it would be inappropriate for a trainee simply to end their placement on achievement of the required hours, without first making ethical endings with the clients on an individual basis and under the guidance of the placement provider and supervisor. While it is not the responsibility of the trainer to 'police' ethical endings within the client setting, the trainer should include a trainee's understanding of endings when assessing their readiness to practise (see section 6).

Trainers can also encourage their trainees to consider continuing with their placements after the course has ended and the requirements achieved. This can help the trainee in a number of ways, including the opportunity to become a more experienced counsellor and to continue personal growth.

The trainee can gather additional 'client hours' should they be intending to progress to another level of membership within an organisation such as BACP or seek paid employment after qualification.

They can take advantage of specialist training that the placement provider may provide from time to time. They can gain insight into the 'world of work' within an agency setting.

It is not uncommon for practitioners to remain as volunteer counsellors long after they have qualified, and this practice can sometimes lead to paid employment with the placement provider.

However, endings do come and often many in a short period of time. The ending of training and the break-up of the trainee group is an ending in itself.

The trainer should take care through tutorials, learning logs and small group work that each trainee is adequately supported to manage the 'multi endings' that trainees encounter (e.g. trainee group, placement work, supervision, personal therapy) and that, wherever possible, the approach best suited to that trainee is developed.

Summary

The *Ethical Framework* places a requirement on a trainer to 'have the skills, attitudes and knowledge required to be competent teachers and facilitators of learning for what is being provided'. (Good Practice, point 74)

In *An introduction to Counselling and Psychotherapy: from theory to practice* Reeves says,

Too many people embark on a training course only to realise one or two years into it that it was not for them, or that the chosen course could not offer them what they had hoped (page 27).

The trainer should ensure that the trainee is knowledgeable about the individual course requirements regarding placements as set out by the awarding organisation, or the college if no awarding organisation is involved, and these requirements are followed throughout the course.

By providing guidance to the trainee throughout the 'placement journey' as described in this resource – from pre-course briefing to ethical endings – the trainer can demonstrate that they are working 'to professional standards' (Commitment 2) and evidencing competency 'to deliver the services being offered to at least fundamental professional standards or better' (Good Practice, point 13).

Training organisations, which do not provide training on appropriate placements could be said to be failing in providing and modelling the '*high levels of good practice in their work, particularly with regard to expected levels of competence and professionalism*' (Good Practice, point 79).

For the trainee, the opportunity to apply their growing knowledge of theory and practice in an appropriate placement setting offers a wonderful opportunity for 'the slow development of a skilful, flexible technique, the constant new angles on what is intellectually known, and the gradual reduction of anxiety...' (Coltart). By providing appropriate guidance throughout the placement journey, the trainer can assist the trainee in unlocking the door to this skilful, flexible technique, setting the trainee on the path to becoming a competent practitioner.

About the Author

Judith Gentry is a freelance author based in North Devon. Her work portfolio includes coaching individuals and teams within organisational settings. 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 BSc with First Class Honours in Reflective Therapeutic Practice. She was a founding member of the BACP Coaching Division in 2010. She is Chair of Trustees of The Burton at Bideford, an Arts Council England accredited museum and art gallery.

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