

FACT SHEET

Live Counselling Services

Introduction

Service providers seeking clarity about the application of any Code provision to a particular service are strongly advised to contact the Executive **before** starting to operate the service.

Live Counselling Services

These services currently fall into two categories:

1. 'One-off' counselling-type services

Calls to this type of service are made for advice in relation, for example, to marital, emotional, relationship and other personal problems. Callers may be referred by services of this type to a body or organisation specialising in a particular area.

An ongoing relationship with an individual counsellor is not central to services in this category. Calls are likely to be 'one-off', not primarily 'therapeutic' in content, but may have an element of short-term counselling. Services of this nature involve customers in vulnerable circumstances. Paragraph 5.4.1 of the Code of Practice highlights the need not to take unfair advantage of such consumers.

Applications for prior permission to operate counselling services in this category will be judged against the following criteria:

• Training

- Operators should hold a formal qualification and should be members of an appropriate professional body.
- Evidence of any training relating specifically to counselling over the telephone should be provided.
- Details of training, experience and membership of any appropriate professional bodies should be given in the promotional material.

• Supervision

- An appropriate structure of supervision should be demonstrated, including supervision of the standard of the service at management level, oversight of operators, supervision for operators which is readily available whether they are working in a call centre or in isolation, and regular group supervision.

- **Repeat/addicted callers**

- The Board is concerned that counselling services in this category have the potential to become addictive, resulting in unauthorised use and/or high bills. The service provider might be asked to provide evidence that all reasonable efforts are made to identify and deal with repeat and 'addicted' callers.

- **Hours of practice**

- The Board would not generally think it appropriate for operators to work shifts longer than four hours per day.

- **Maximum call duration**

- The Board would not normally think it necessary or appropriate for the duration of a call to exceed 20 minutes.

2. 'Traditional', ongoing counselling services

Services in this category offer a programme of therapy over a given period of time with an individual counsellor. Calls may have a duration of up to one hour.

In order to ensure that relevant safeguards are put into place to prevent the unauthorised use of the telephone (Section 6.3.2 of the Code of Practice) and to ensure that vulnerable users are not taken advantage of (paragraph 5.4.1 of the Code of Practice), the Board will assess applications for prior permission to operate counselling services in this category against the following criteria:

- **Training**

- A formal counselling qualification should be held and, in addition, the level of training will be considered. Operators should be members of an appropriate professional body.
 - Details of training, experience and membership of any appropriate professional bodies should be given in the promotional material.

- **Supervision**

- Evidence of a supervisor, who should be a trained counsellor/supervisor, should be provided.

- **Hours of practice**

- The Board will wish to know what measures have been put into place to ensure that operators will spend no more than four hours per day counselling, in accordance with British Association of Counselling Guidelines.

- **Maximum call duration**

- It is unlikely that permission will be granted for any service that will exceed one hour per session.

- **Number of sessions**

- Counselling should be carried out over a limited number of sessions with the agreement of the counsellor and the client, with a review being carried out at the end of every four sessions.

- Arrangements should be made for a non-premium rate means for a potential client to set up an agreement with a counsellor. A written agreement, to be entered into by the client and the counsellor, should be signed by both parties prior to the commencement of premium rate counselling sessions. This agreement should set out the cost of the calls, the length of the sessions and how many sessions could, or will, be held prior to review.

Following the agreed number of sessions, a review should be carried out and any further agreements reached should be made in writing. In the event of a dispute, PhonepayPlus may generally ask to see such an agreement, while accepting that the interaction between counsellor and client is confidential.

- 'Mock-up' samples of both the initial advertising for the service (which should not include the premium rate number) and the agreement to be entered into by counsellor and client (which should include the premium rate number, pricing information, etc.) should be submitted to PhonepayPlus with the application for prior permission.

Contacting the Executive:

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