

**EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES:
A BRIEF GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS IN WALES**

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP's) are used by public sector and private sector employers as part of a package of **employee and welfare benefits**. Provision of such a service has been shown to reduce absenteeism, improve performance and foster a greater sense of wellbeing in the organisation as a whole. For organisations undergoing radical change or restructuring, or facing particular challenges, such provision may be seen as particularly valuable.

The core of an EAP is the **confidential counselling service** provided to help employees with problems which may be affecting performance at work, for example, depression, anxiety, relationship difficulties, alcoholic and other addictions and stresses in the workplace itself.

Where professional counselling is unavailable in local GP surgeries, as is still largely the case in much of Wales, it may make particularly good sense for employers to offer a staff counselling facility. It should be remembered also that failure on the part of employers to fulfil their duty of care towards their employees may lead to costly legal settlements.

Full-scale EAP's also provide 24-hour telephone helplines and limited telephone access to specialists outside the counselling field, for example legal and financial advisors. Such provision inevitably adds to the cost of the service and may not be regarded as necessary or desirable. These extras may well be better provided elsewhere, for example, the crisis counselling for which the Samaritans are specifically trained, and they often appear to be included merely as a selling point by large EAP providers. (See also 'Telephone Helplines' below.)

TELEPHONE HELPLINES

Some employers choose the option of a staff telephone helpline only, believing that it is a cost-effective way of meeting the duty of care requirement. This option, however attractive from a cost point of view, is undoubtedly second-best in terms of offering meaningful help to stressed employees. Contact may be brief and superficial and telephone lines are normally centrally manned and therefore usually located far away from the employee's base. Providers and their staff are unlikely to have any real knowledge of the organisation for which the employees work or the community in which they live.

It is important to distinguish between telephone *helplines* and telephone *counselling*; the latter may have a genuine role to play where employees live and work in extremely remote communities but it is unlikely to be any less expensive to provide than a face-to-face service.

THE FACE-TO-FACE COUNSELLING SERVICE

- **THE PROVIDER** Employee counselling services are sometimes provided from within the organisation but a major drawback of such provision is the possible perception, on the part of users, of **lack of confidentiality**. Such fears may be particularly powerful within an organisation perceived to be in process of downsizing or re-structuring. Moreover, appointment of someone from within the organisation as staff counsellor may mean a confusion of roles and second best in terms of professional counselling skills and experience. Many organisations therefore entrust the provision of an employee counselling service to an **outside professional agency** with no ongoing stake in the purchasing organisation beyond the counselling service itself.
- **THE COUNSELLING** The type of counselling offered in externally provided employee counselling services normally follows the model of **brief focussed intervention**. A set maximum number of sessions is agreed on in advance between the purchasing organisation and the providing agency. The higher this set maximum is, the higher the total cost of the scheme to the organisation.
- **THE COUNSELLORS** The recruitment, management and payment of counsellors is the responsibility of the providing agency. A good agency uses only **fully qualified and experienced professional counsellors**, ensures that they receive regular clinical supervision and pays them the rate for the job.
- **THE PLACE** Clients are counselled **away from the place of work**, on premises provided by the counselling agency or the individual counsellors. This reinforces the confidentiality of the service, about which employee clients are particularly concerned. The client's home is not regarded as an appropriate setting for professional work of this kind.

- **ACCESS** Employees have **direct access** to the service, without needing to go through Personnel, Occupational Health or any other department within the organisation. Designated departments or managers may also have the facility to refer personnel to the service. All employees are given a leaflet describing the service, with a contact telephone number which they may call. A preliminary informal assessment may be conducted at this stage to ascertain the caller's problem and to determine whether counselling is appropriate. If this is the case, the agency takes the caller's telephone number and puts one of its counsellors in the appropriate geographical area in touch with the client.

WELSH ORGANISATIONS: A LOCAL OR A NATIONAL PROVIDER?

Most large providers of Employee Assistance Programmes in the UK are based in England. There are several advantages in using such a provider: they are experienced in the business of marketing and running employee counselling services, they may appear to confer prestige on the client organisation and they offer the fringe benefits referred to above (24-hour telephone helplines, telephone access to legal and financial experts, etc).

There are, however, disadvantages. The provider's counsellors in Wales, especially outside the industrialised south, may be so widely scattered that clients have to travel a long way to see them. The agency has probably not interviewed its Wales-based counsellors in person and quality control may therefore be insufficiently rigorous, particularly where Welsh-speaking counsellors are concerned. The provider is unlikely to be acquainted with the community in which the client organisation is based and where its employees live. And of course if the providing agency is based in England, all central profits from the operation will be realised in England, not in Wales.

Local providers of staff counselling services in Wales, such as WWCPs, are few and far between. They are likely to be small and therefore are unlikely to offer 24-hour helplines or access to legal and financial experts, nor will they have the gloss and slickness which the big players in the field display. We do, however, offer a number of advantages.

WWCPs has an expanding network of Associate Counsellors throughout West Wales and clients are normally seen for counselling within a 20-mile radius of their home or place of work. All our Associate Counsellors have been carefully vetted and personally interviewed; they are fully qualified professional therapists with

wide experience of the counselling function and many also have a training and lecturing background. We have specialist counsellor-trainers in areas such as post-trauma counselling, bullying at work and stress. Our counsellors are properly paid and we expect high standards of professionalism in all they do. Everyone who works for us lives in West Wales and so has local knowledge; all monies earned and all profits remain in the area.

We presently have native Welsh-speaking counsellors based in Ceredigion for those clients who choose to use Welsh in their counselling.

Last but not least, although we will not contract below the level of six sessions per client (we believe that little useful work can be done in fewer than six sessions) and therefore may appear to be more expensive than an agency which is willing to contract for, say, three sessions per client, we are almost certainly less expensive than a national provider in terms of the costs of each face-to-face counselling session.

Corporate clients currently include Ceredigion County Council, the National Library of Wales, the Institute for Grassland & Environmental Research, Cymdeithas Tai Cantref, Ceredigion Local Health Board,, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, Milford Haven Port Authority Group.