



To: Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for Public Health Services

From: Carolyn Smyth, Chief Executive Buckinghamshire Mind

Date: 28 January 2010

Subject: Decommissioning of Counselling in Buckinghamshire

Introduction

The recent decision by Buckinghamshire PCT to decommission counselling in the county raises numerous questions which, to date, it has not been possible to obtain answers to.

Despite strenuous efforts to understand the rationale and process behind the decision to focus the provision of talking therapies in primary care exclusively on delivering cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) based interventions it is still unclear why the PCT is no longer prepared to commission counselling.

Buckinghamshire Mind's key objectives in questioning the PCT's approach to the commissioning of talking therapies are

- to ensure the implications of reducing choice for service users are debated
- to understand the rationale and process for removing counselling
- to request that the PCT reappraises its decision in consultation with GPs, other clinicians, patient groups and providers

Background

Buckinghamshire Mind is an independent charity affiliated to the national mental health charity Mind. We are a community-based, campaigning organisation running services across Buckinghamshire including befriending, supported employment, support groups and counselling for both adults and children/young people. Our work is currently supported by 130 volunteers.

Our adult counselling service based at the Dove Centre in Aylesbury will close at the end of March 2010.

IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies)

In October 2007 the Department of Health announced funding for the 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapies' (IAPT) programme in England. The programme was introduced to combat long waiting times for talking therapies and an over-reliance on anti-depressants by significantly increasing the availability of cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

Buckinghamshire was selected as a pilot site for the IAPT programme in 2007. It was selected on the basis of a partnership between statutory, third sector and independent providers across Buckinghamshire, which provided a 'comprehensive range of interventions' including CBT and counselling. Consequently, Buckinghamshire was awarded the funding to set up a new IAPT service, 'Healthy Minds', which would deliver CBT based talking therapies.

Buckinghamshire Mind and Primary Care Counsellors and Psychotherapists (PCCP), a not-for-profit organisation providing GP counselling in Wycombe and South Bucks, remained as two of the partners on the Primary Care Mental Health Development Board. This board has had oversight of the development of 'Healthy Minds' and in addition had a remit from commissioning to design the optimum configuration for psychological services in Buckinghamshire. This was to include CBT, counselling and secondary mental health services.

Despite this work being well advanced, and with no prior discussion or consultation, providers were informed in October 2009 that the provision of counselling was to be removed from the county.

Impact on Service Users

The decommissioning of counselling will leave a significant gap in the availability of talking therapies in primary care and will remove patient choice as only CBT based therapies will be available through the Healthy Minds service. With nothing commissioned to replace counselling there will be no alternative in primary care for patients who are not suitable for CBT.

CBT is an effective therapy but not suitable for all conditions. Clients with symptoms of anxiety or depression (depending on the severity) will explore through CBT the problems they are experiencing within the context of the 'here and now', focusing on behaviour and negative/irrational thoughts. It acknowledges the influence that past issues have on the present but does not spend time exploring the past with the client to allow them to gain insight into their state of mind.

The majority of the clients using our counselling services have issues resulting from childhood experiences, childhood trauma, the environment they grew up in/are living in, relationships, interpersonal difficulties, attachment disorders, issues around abandonment or sexual abuse. Many of these people would fall outside of the criteria for Healthy Minds. In concentrating on the value of the relationship between client and therapist, counselling aims to work through these often painful issues so clients can understand why they feel as they do or have behaved as they have.

There is clearly a need for both approaches and it was the PCT's original intention to provide counselling alongside CBT, as in neighbouring counties. Its sudden change of direction in removing counselling and offering only CBT will inevitably mean that there will be clients that will not be suitable for the Healthy Minds service who will have nowhere else to go except their GP.

The Secretary of State for Health has stated

“IAPT stands and falls on choice. The intent was always that this would be a fully inclusive programme, drawing on all NICE-approved psychological therapies...It means we can begin to offer fully-formed IAPT services, providing people with a choice between different NICE approved treatments, such as CBT, Interpersonal Therapy, Couples Therapy, Brief Dynamic Therapy, Counselling and Collaborative Care – all held accountable to the public and commissioners by careful monitoring of the outcomes they deliver.”¹

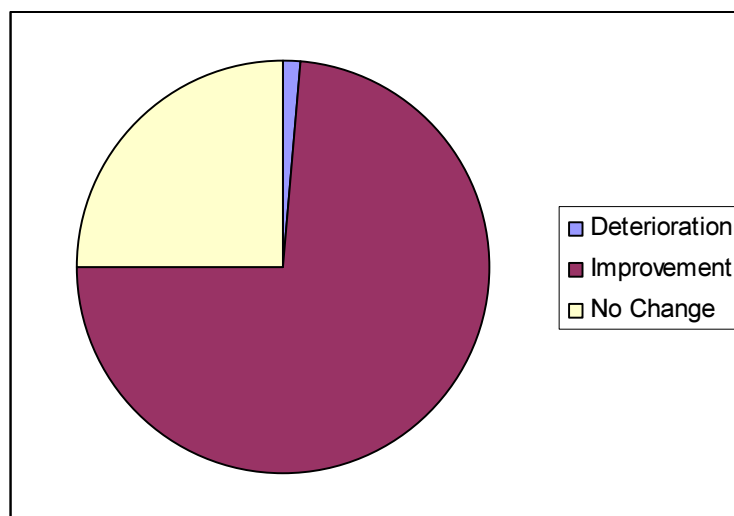
Rationale and Decision Making Process

Despite many requests for clarity and transparency regarding the PCT’s decision making process it is not clear what it has based its decision to decommission counselling on. The various written responses that have been issued to date seem to refer to a broad range of reasons. For example, reference is made to “NHS funding pressures in 2010/11” but then that “a proportion (of the saving of about £350,000) will certainly be a contribution to our savings”. It is not clear therefore what part financial pressure had to play on the decision.

In a similar way the PCT makes extensive references in its correspondence to only focussing its investment on “evidence-based therapies” and gives the clear impression that there is no evidence of the effectiveness of counselling. The PCT is aware that Bucks Mind and PCCP use CORE (Clinical Outcomes for Routine Evaluation), an NHS-approved outcomes measure.

The following chart shows the CORE outcomes for Buckinghamshire Mind:

Period: 1 October 2008 to 30 September 2009
 73.73% of clients showed a reliable and clinical improvement
 24.94% of clients showed no change
 1.3% of clients showed deterioration



¹ Savoy Partnerships Speech, November 2009

Statements made by the PCT such as “we are not able to invest in those services that lack evidence of their benefit” and “there are practices being done where there is no evidence of clinical effectiveness” undermine counselling and the dedication and expertise of counsellors. They are also damaging to the reputation of Buckinghamshire Mind and other providers. In the years we have provided a counselling service for the PCT there have been no concerns raised about our performance.

The PCT appears to have difficulty in giving a reason for taking the decision it has. It is not clear what part financial pressures have played nor is it clear whether decisions have been made on clinical grounds and, if so, the extent to which clinicians were consulted.

The Need for a Reappraisal

Commitments were made by Commissioning to Buckinghamshire Mind and PCCP that there would be a review of counselling services, followed by consultation and a tender for future provision. The PCT states that a “systematic review” took place but the outcomes of this have not been shared and the promised consultation did not take place. Despite the commitments made providers were excluded from any discussion about the future and we are unaware of any consultation having taken place with GPs, patient groups or other stakeholders.

The removal of counselling from Buckinghamshire will create a damaging gap in the provision of psychological therapies in primary care. Buckinghamshire Mind is requesting that the PCT urgently conduct an open, transparent and clinically informed reappraisal of the decision to stop counselling, with the involvement of all stakeholders.