



British Association for
Counselling & Psychotherapy

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Commissioner for Older People Legislation Team
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All calls charged at BT National Rate

Dear Colleague

Re: A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) would like to submit the following comments to the consultation '*A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland*'.

BACP is the leading professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in the UK, with a membership of over 32,000 practitioners across the UK, drawn from the various professional disciplines in the field of counselling and psychotherapy and based in a range of settings.

1.) Do you agree with need for a Commissioner for Older People?

Yes, BACP supports the proposals for a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland and believes that the role will create a strong independent voice for older people.

2.) Do you think the Commissioner should take account of the UN Principles for Older Persons?

BACP agrees that the UN Principles should be taken account of, particularly number 11 '*Older persons should have access to health care to help them to maintain or regain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness*'.

10.) Do you agree that the duties proposed are suitable for a Commissioner for Older People?

BACP agrees that the outlined duties are suitable. BACP would further suggest that to fully safeguard and promote the interests of older people, the Commissioner will need to take into consideration the mental health and wellbeing of older people, specifically looking at the discrimination they face when accessing psychological therapy services.

A report by the HealthCare Commission in England '*Equality in Later Life*', found that older people are discriminated against access to out of hours services, psychological treatment, and alcohol services. The provision of psychological treatments for older

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people was found to be poor in most of the trusts. One trust reported that in an audit of 1300 referrals to psychological treatment from GPs, only 49 were for people older than 65. Further evidence (Wilkinson, 2009) suggests that older adults have been severely under-represented in GP referrals, indicating an ageist bias in favour of younger cases. On page 14 and page 50 of the consultation document the proposed duties of the Commissioner include the 'elimination of discrimination against older people'. BACP would suggest that this is a priority for the Commissioner.

It is highlighted in the consultation document that the challenges faced by older people include access to health and social care. A new report '*Are Older Patients Denied Access To Psychological Services Due To Ageism In The UK?*' (Wilkinson, 2009: Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford) has found that there are serious gaps in the treatments available to older patients experiencing later life problems associated with old age including depression, anxiety disorders, panic disorder and sleep disorders. A report by Audit Scotland 'Overview of mental health services' has recommended that the Scottish Government identify and address any gaps in services for older people and the availability of psychological therapies.

Wilkinson (2009) further suggests that 'despite recent increases in the range of cognitive behavioural therapy applications for older people, there still appears to be some prejudice in referring patients to these services and in inclusion of these patients in randomised clinical trials. Older people often have a preference for psychological treatments and presenting treatments as education rather than therapy can also increase their appeal'.

BACP has previously commissioned an external review of counselling older people (Hill et al, 2004), which concluded that counselling is effective with older people, particularly in the treatment of depression, with outcomes consistent with those found in younger populations, suggesting that old age is not a barrier to being able to benefit from counselling.

Despite the benefits of counselling to the older population, older people are frequently not identified or diagnosed with mental health problems as their symptoms may be mistakenly attributed to the effects of the ageing process. We believe that work is necessary to identify psychological problems among older people to ensure problems are not left untreated.

We hope these comments will be of value. Please do contact me if you would like to discuss further any of the points our comments may have raised.

Yours sincerely




References:

Hill, A., and Brettle, A. (2004) Counselling older people: a systematic review. BACP: Rugby.

Wilkinson, P (2009) Are Older Patients Denied Access To Psychological Services Due To Ageism In The UK?. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved June 19, 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/04/090423082917.htm>.