



MARCHES COUNSELLING SERVICE:

Home and Hybrid Working Policy

Includes guidance on: conducting counselling work with clients using remote technology alongside face to face work and the appropriate management of changes in risk

www.marchescounselling.org

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Responsible Group: Board of Trustees.

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Where this is to be held: in the main MCS office, digitally

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Following the pandemic, Marches Counselling Service (MCS) has moved to accepting remote forms of communication for some of its activities. This policy outlines those where remote and home working is deemed permissible and in what circumstances.
- 1.2 It is understood that remote working is necessary in times of ‘lockdown’, where there are government restrictions on people’s movements and contact with others. MCS will always abide by these restrictions when they are in place, in order to safeguard the health and safety of both clients and staff and maintain the service to existing clients. However, acceptance of remote/home working in this situation cannot be assumed to be acceptance for all time.
- 1.3 The need to ensure adequate training for remote working has resulted in staff now able to fulfil their commitments to MCS in various ways. It is understood that all staff engaged by MCS in future will be expected to be able to work both remotely and face-to-face. How this may be achieved is outlined in this policy.
- 1.4 It is also recognised that remote working may make some activities viable which were not before, and can be a tool for more effective outreach into the scattered rural

community of much of Herefordshire. Considerations of this nature will inform both service and policy development.

2. Principles for decision making

- 2.1 It may not always be obvious what decisions best serve MCS with regard to remote or home working. Final responsibility for decisions will rest with the trustees, but it is expected that discussion will take place between all interested parties before any decision is made where there are different service or individual requirements.
- 2.2 Considerations of Health and Safety for all will always outweigh personal choice.
- 2.3 Where individuals' personal circumstances dictate a behaviour out of step with the norm, MCS will always consider the circumstances of that individual and endeavour to make appropriate arrangements where possible. However, there may be instances where the accommodation would require more adjustment than is reasonable. Where there is a specific request for either face-to-face or remote working from the client, the reasons for this will be fully discussed with the client themselves. When a request comes from a staff member, this will be discussed with their line manager, and a joint decision made about the way forward. Both staff and clients have recourse to a trustee if an agreement cannot be reached.
- 2.4 Decisions may be made about the mode of communication and physical circumstances acceptable. Some of these are detailed below. Considerations around confidentiality and the legal requirements of GDPR will always be uppermost, at the same time as recognising that such arguments can be used to consciously or unconsciously engage in discriminatory behaviour.

3. Equality and diversity

- 3.1 The information contained in this document is available to and applies to all members of MCS as well as clients.
- 3.2 Wherever possible recommendations should be applied equally, although it is recognised that people's personal circumstances will differ and require additional considerations to ensure fairness of treatment. Non-discriminatory practice does not necessarily mean treating everyone the same. In some situations, it might be quite the reverse.
- 3.3 MCS does not accept a 'right' to engage in remote or home working. As relationship is at the heart of the work we do, personal contact should be the 'norm' rather than the exception. Reasons for working remotely or from home will be considered on a case by case scenario except in the circumstances outlined above.

4. Service expectations for remote working with clients

4.1 Remote working with clients is only acceptable if:

- a risk assessment has been completed which is indicative
- both therapist and client have a secure confidential space where the work can be done
- the therapist has received training for working in the mode intended
- the therapist has access to secure storage (for client notes) and the shredding of confidential waste
- the therapist brings any clinical issues concerning the remote aspect of the work to supervision
- the therapist brings any practical issues concerning the remote aspect of the work to the Clinical Co-ordinator.

4.2 Any agreement for remote working with a client may be changed at their request for face to face contact. In these circumstances it should be understood that this may result in a change of therapist. This should be fully discussed with the client and in supervision.

4.3 It is possible that remote working may permit couple or family work, where one or more parties are unable to attend sessions face to face. It is not recommended that hybrid working takes place in these circumstances (ie one person face to face and another remote) but that all participants be remote so the person to person dynamic is equally protected.

5. Temporary or occasional homeworking arrangements

5.1 There are a number of circumstances in which the ability to work from home on an occasional or temporary basis may be of benefit:

- When a child or elderly relative becomes unwell or arrangements for their care break down at short notice;
- When, despite being fit to work, travelling to the office is difficult (for example, due to recovery from an injury such as a broken leg);
- When public transport has been disrupted (for example, by the weather or by a strike that affects your travel arrangements);
- When a quiet, uninterrupted work environment will assist in dealing with a backlog of administrative tasks or in writing reports to a deadline;
- During any period when working from the office is impossible, such as during severe weather or a global pandemic.

5.2 In these circumstances, working at home can be authorised by a line manager where, in their opinion:

- There is work that can be undertaken at home
- There is the required equipment to work from home
- Working at home is cost-effective and any increase in work that may be passed to others as a result is kept to a minimum.

5.3.1 If a staff member is suffering from symptoms associated with a contagious disease, but is well enough to work, they may be required to work from home during their illness. This is in order to protect the health and safety of colleagues and to prevent the spread of infection within the workplace.

5.3.2 If circumstances affect the ability of MCS to allow staff into the workplace because of government restrictions and/or health and safety requirements, they may be required to work temporarily from home.

6. Conditions and rules relating to homeworking

Any terms on which it is agreed that you may work from home will include the following:

- MCS reserves the right to terminate the homeworking arrangements subject to reasonable notice, for example if the role changes such that homeworking is no longer suitable.
- Work will be subject to the same supervision, processes and objectives that apply with face-to-face working.
- Homeworking arrangements will be regularly monitored and steps taken to address any perceived problems. Information relevant to the work will be sent remotely.
- Even if homeworking, staff may be required to attend the office or other reasonable location for meetings, training courses or other events.
- Working at or from home may affect home and contents insurance policies, mortgage, lease or rental agreements. Any necessary arrangements with insurers, bank, mortgage provider or landlord should be made before commencing homeworking.
- MCS is not responsible for associated costs of working from home including the costs of heating, lighting, electricity or telephone calls. However, a home-working payment will be made if remote working has become a requirement.

7. Working at Home: Data Security and Confidentiality

7.1 Staff are required to read all MCS policies relating to computer use, electronic communications and data security, checking that they are in receipt of the most current version of these policies.

7.2 Any incidents involving the security of information relating to clients, or anyone working with or for MCS must be reported immediately to administration.

7.3 It is vital that paperwork is kept up to date and relevant copies provided to the office for client files. MCS recognises that this places extra pressure upon staff, particularly with regard to closing paperwork. Any queries can be discussed with administration.

8. Working at Home: Health and Safety

- 8.1 Anyone working from home, has the same health and safety duties as other staff. It is recognised that the nature of the work of MCS can result in vicarious traumatisation in clinical staff. All staff must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of anyone else who might be affected by their actions and omissions. Staff must ensure that working patterns and levels of work both over time and during shorter periods are not detrimental to health and wellbeing.
- 8.2 Training in safeguarding and full consideration of risk with remote working is essential.
- 8.3 MCS will not support therapists working with clients face-to-face in either's own homes, unless there are exceptional circumstances which have been fully explored in supervision. Clients should not be given the personal address of staff, and telephone calls out of the office should be via a mobile number which is used for work.
- 8.4 Staff must use their knowledge, experience and training to identify and report any health and safety concerns to administration, and the appropriate supervisor.

9. Supervision

- 9.1 Supervision sessions will return to face-to-face meetings as soon as practically possible for all members of a group.
- 9.2 Although a therapist may be working remotely with clients, face to face attendance at supervision may still be required. A hybrid model for supervision is not acceptable in any but the most unusual cases.
- 9.2 Where there are difficulties in all members reaching the same position with regard to returning, discussion of the barriers and possible solutions should be openly discussed. It may be that to allow for acceptable individual differences, some re-arrangement of membership of groups may be facilitated. This should be in consultation with the Clinical Management Group.

10. Attendance at meetings

- 10.1 Experience during the pandemic has indicated that some meetings may be conducted remotely with reasonable success. However, although perhaps permitting some people to attend when traveling to the office previously would have been more difficult, it has generally been felt that an important aspect of our business and working group meetings has been the opportunity for a level of personal exchange not achievable remotely.
- 10.2 Each meeting will need to consider the positions of its members to decide whether returning to face to face meetings at the office in Hereford is the sensible option. The

possibility of hybrid meetings, with some members remaining remote, can be considered; but the impact upon the dynamics of the work should be uppermost. It may be that for a time an alternating pattern of face to face meetings and remote meetings will be piloted until a decision is reached.

11. Homeworking payments

- 11.1 Where homeworking is necessitated due to government requirements for isolation, a homeworking payment will be made toward basic increases in costs within the home.
- 11.2 At present this has been set at £1 for each hour worked, up to the maximum of £6 per week, this being the government tax-free allowance for homeworking.
- 11.3 Staff members should keep a clear record of their hours and how worked so that payment can be made. Staff without this record will not receive the payment. Payments can be requested on the monthly expenses sheets, or will generally be made quarterly.