Report on the meeting of organisations of counsellors and psychotherapists called by Anne Milton MP (Shadow Spokesperson for Mental Health) at Westminster Hall 2 November 2009

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Along with numerous other organisations including UKCP, BACP and BPC, the Alliance was invited to attend a meeting arranged and chaired by Anne Milton MP, the Shadow spokesperson for Mental Health, along with a large number of other therapists' groups. Earl Howe, the mental health shadow spokesperson in the Lords was there too. On the "hot seat" of the opening platform were HPC's Marc Seale, Lynn Gabriel of BACP, Darian Leader of The College of Psychoanalysts and Colin Walker of MIND.

The meeting was very lively, to say the least, with plenty of argument about the respective merits of state regulation, "independent statutory regulation" as it was termed during the meeting, as well as more specifically regulation by the HPC, and the current form HPC regulation was taking. Limited time was given to alternatives to statutory regulation, as it seemed that most present favoured some form of statutory regulation, or at least accepted it was inevitable. Many said how diverse and divided the field was, which made regulation both necessary and yet also a delicate art. Most also felt though that the current proposed form was a sledgehammer.

Representatives from MIND articulated the case that abuse from a small number of therapists was occurring, without being able to present researched evidence. A client was produced who vehemently presented details of the difficulties she had experienced in making a complaint about her therapist's sexual advances and how the relevant professional organisation had stonewalled her case and given lenient treatment to the therapist.

A certain amount was made of the lack of research undertaken into the question of the need for regulation and the most desirable form for the UK. The dearth of actual researched evidence of therapist abuse received a fair amount of attention. The Chair of HPC stated that a CHRE report found that boundary violations occurred right across the "health professions" field and was about 4%, not specifically psychotherapy or counselling. She then went on to assert that a small minority were abusers "without any shadow of doubt". Darian Leader then stated that there was no constancy in the statistics claimed, with alleged abuse rates varying from 5-10% at one end down to less that 1%.

BACP said that regulation had split the professions and that the current proposals were not "fit for purpose". They presented a strong case in objecting to the differentiation between counsellors and psychotherapists as their key objection to the current proposals, although they continued to favour state regulation in principle. By contrast, it was not clear what UKCP as a whole had to say on the issues under discussion, although Tom Warneke did say that more work had to be done about the counsellor/psychotherapist distinctions, that the HPC complaint process would leave people more injured, and that the anger about HPC regulation was also part of a wider concern about government initiatives like IATP, Skills for Health and NICE. However, we noted that a lot of unfavourable remarks were made about UKCP, and in particular its ability to handle complaints.

Anne Milton said that she wanted to hear what people's views were. She did however very quickly make it clear that she personally had never in all her Parliamentary career since 2005 been lobbied by so many people. There had, she said been a huge number of e-mails and letters. She felt that there was something in this situation that was very different from any other she had met. This, she said, "was exceptional". She observed that the HPC had not by any means succeeded in bringing everybody in the therapy community on board with the regulation project, commenting with an exclamation, "Recognise the anger – it's huge!" In response to the Alliance's stated preference, by

Professor Samuels, for a halting of the regulation process while a Convention is called, she said “this meeting could be the first of many conventions”. She commented that the aspect of what she, with her nursing background called “health control” of psychotherapy and counselling was irritating people and she said “it feels silly”. Finally, in response to comments about the HPC taking 18 months according to their statutory requirements, to resolve a complaint, she said that that was “completely unreasonable”.

Mr Seale, sitting next to her, must have been feeling distinctly uncomfortable and near the end he got up to go and pick up his coat and bag - was this symbolic, we wondered, or to beat a hasty retreat! More seriously, Anne Milton made it clear time and time again that she was not at all satisfied with HPC as the proposed regulator. She said this quite explicitly and carefully. At one point she condemned something the Chair of HPC said as 'silly' and accused Mar Seale of 'threatening' her.

There was a particularly telling point in the discussion when a lot of groups articulated how unhappy they were with the HPC’s current Standards of Proficiency. It has been the case for the Alliance and other bodies including BACP and UKCP that these standards were too overly dominated by a medical model and risked marginalising or excluding large swathes of the professions. At one point a representative from CPC, a body whose practitioners predominantly worked in the NHS, complained that she didn’t “recognise her profession”. (This person is also a UKCP registrant and chair of training standards for the Psychotherapeutic Counsellors Section). Anne Milton interjected that up to now she had thought this may have seemed a “rubbish” argument but she now was very clear that there was a problem here. Moreover whether the HPC was an appropriate regulator for the psychological professions was a legitimate question.

We then heard that HPC were reviewing their generic standards in the light of the criticism made and that further ideas would be presented for consultation. We were left with the impression that more work was to be done and that the vast amount of comment was making an impact. Having said this, scepticism was expressed about the level and extent of professional involvement, such as in with the PLG process that had led to the Draft Standards. The Alliance have been pointing out that so far this has been very limited and partial. Anne Milton agreed that for the regulation project to work, the professions as a whole need to be involved with the process.

In conclusion, among the other summaries made from the platform, Anne Milton said that she hoped the HPC would take on board the criticisms made. “This is”, she said, “very different from other professions” and the HPC should hear this.

John Gloster Smith, UKAHPP member