BACP report on the statutory regulation meeting convened by the shadow health minster at Westminster, 2/11/2009

BACP, along with the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), the British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) and the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy - Against State Regulation, was invited to attend a meeting convened and Chaired by Anne Milton, MP, Conservative Shadow Minister for Health. Also in attendance was Earl Howe, the Health Shadow Spokesperson in the House of Lords. A large number of other therapist groups were represented at the meeting. Lynne Gabriel, BACP Chair, Marc Seale, Chief Executive Officer of the Health Professions Council, Colin Walker of MIND and Darian Leader of The College of Psychoanalysts, joined Anne Milton and Earl Howe to form a panel on the platform.

Members of the panel were invited to offer opening statements on their association's / organisation's position on the statutory regulation of counselling and psychotherapy. The BACP Chair's statement noted key points from the BACP consultation response and identified that regulation had split the professions. She noted that although BACP continued to favour statutory regulation in principle, the current proposals were not "fit for purpose" and presented a strong case in objecting to the differentiation between counsellors and psychotherapists in the HPC proposals. She also emphasised that BACP saw counselling and psychotherapy as being of equal value. There was general agreement that the current HPC proposal was not fit for purpose.

During the meeting, from a 'straw poll' undertaken by Anne Milton, it was evident that the majority were supportive of working towards some form of statutory regulation. Anne Milton said that she wanted to hear people's views on statutory regulation, stating that across her Parliamentary career she had not experienced the level of lobbying and volume of mail she had received in relation to statutory regulation. She believed that this set the regulation of counselling and psychotherapy aside from other professional groups taken/being taken into regulation and impressed upon HPC that it must be cognisant of this difference. Across the debate, HPC was repeatedly and firmly held to account by the Shadow Minister.

The audience generated a range of questions and assertions associated with statutory regulation, including comments on the dearth of research evidence to endorse the need for the statutory regulation. The HPC President cited a Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence (CHRE) report which found that boundary violations occurred right across the "health professions" field and the incidence rate was about 4%. MIND was accompanied by an individual who offered a client perspective, giving details of the difficulties experienced when making a complaint about their therapist's sexual advances and their negative experience with the professional organisations concerned.

Many groups articulated their dissatisfaction with HPC's current Standards of Proficiency for registrants, apparently underpinned by a bio-medical model. Many of the criteria were not relevant to the social / relational approaches represented in counselling and psychotherapy. HPC noted that it was reviewing its generic standards in the light of criticisms received and that further ideas would be presented for consultation. It was evident that the enormous amount of feedback received was making an impact with the HPC. In relation to the PLG process scepticism was expressed about the level and extent of professional involvement, including the limited nature of the PLG membership and the process that led to the production of the draft Standards of Proficiency. Anne Milton agreed that for the regulation project to work, the professions as a whole need to be involved with the process.

Intriguingly, the PLG meeting scheduled for 18 and 19 November has been cancelled. Letters to all PLG members indicate the HPC need to complete its data analysis of the consultation responses. Coming so soon after the Westminster meeting, we can also assume that our interventions have had some effect and await with interest further detail from HPC.
Lynne Gabriel, BACP Chair,