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COSCA Guideline on the Suitability of Premises

1. Introduction

1.1 The premises in which counselling and psychotherapy takes place should be suitable for the establishment and maintenance of a positive and safe therapeutic relationship between the client and the counsellor and/or psychotherapist.

1.2 COSCA Registered counsellors and psychotherapists are expected to carry out counselling and psychotherapy in premises that are suitable and fit for purpose.

1.3 This guideline on the suitability of premises:

- is written to assist COSCA registered counsellors and psychotherapists to assess the suitability of their premises for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy
- aims to summarise the key variables that are involved in premises being suitable for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy
- is offered as a reflective tool for COSCA registrants who are either in the process of establishing suitable premises or wish to re-assess the suitability of existing premises
- provides a checklist for assessing the suitability of a premise used for counselling and psychotherapy.

2. Location of Premises

2.1 The premises used for counselling and psychotherapy should be easy and safe for clients to access, and appropriate for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, including during the hours of darkness. Access to the premises should, if possible, allow clients to arrive and leave without others being aware that they are attending therapy.

2.2 The COSCA registrant will provide clients with clear directions to and about the premises and inform them about the availability of public transport, car parking spaces, and any other relevant matters, as required.

2.3 Where the premise is in the home of the COSCA Registrant, this should be designed as a professional space and the following points considered:

- the impression created by the entrance to the building and therapy room
- the floor on which the therapy room is situated. If the room is not situated on the ground floor, clients should be advised of this in advance.
- how visible/exposed the rest of the house is from the therapy room.

2.4 Further consideration needs to be given to:

- the potential barriers to accessing the premises for disabled people
- making reasonable adjustments for clients who have disabilities to access the premises
- the availability and suitability of a WC for use by all clients, including those who are disabled
- the requirements of the Equality Act (2010)
- the management of the arrival and departure of clients that takes account of their privacy and confidentiality

3. The Therapy Room

The room in which the therapy takes place:

- must be spacious enough to provide comfortable seating for the numbers using it without the risk of the invasion of their personal space.
- should be light, informal, comfortable and prove a space in which therapy sessions are inaudible to those outside of the room
- must be laid out to give the appearance of being devoted to professional activity. Sitting rooms, dining rooms, and playrooms should not normally be used as therapy rooms, unless special arrangements have been made to adapt them.
- should conceal audio/visual and other electrical appliances, unless they are being used during the therapy
- should not visibly contain personal belongings e.g. photographs, birthday and other cards.
- should be quiet and private, and during therapy sessions have no interruptions from colleagues, other occupants of the premises, children, animals, or neighbours. Telephones, fax machines, pagers, laptops, ipads, PCs, doorbells and any other electronic means of communication should be switched off or made inaudible during sessions with clients.
- should not be overlooked in such a way that its occupants are visible to others.

4. Storage of Client Information

4.1 If client information is kept on the premise, it must be securely stored.

5. Insurance and Legal Use of Premises

5.1 COSCA registrants should ensure that any insurance cover that is required for using their premises for counselling and psychotherapy is in place e.g. public liability, accident, professional indemnity etc.

5.2 For further information on insurance of premises and on working from home as a counsellor or psychotherapist, please see the following article published in the Spring 2010 edition of the COSCA Journal, Counselling in Scotland: 'Working from Home' by Rob Watson. You can find this article on COSCA's website under journal.

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5.3 COSCA registrants should ensure that they are permitted under the terms of their ownership, lease or rental of their premises to use the premises for counselling and psychotherapy.

6. Personal Safety and Care

6.1 Personal safety is an important issue in the delivery of counselling and psychotherapy. COSCA registrants are often alone in their premises with a client or clients, and sometimes this could leave them open to violent and aggressive behaviour from their clients. Some premises may be more potentially dangerous than others from this kind of behaviour.

6.2 COSCA registrants should consider their personal safety and have a health and safety protocol in place. This protocol may be their own if in independent practice or their organisation's if they work in an organisational setting.

6.3 This protocol should include carrying out an initial risk assessment about whether it is safe for the COSCA registrant to work with clients. The protocol should also outline practical measures to minimise the risk to their personal safety from clients while ensuring that they continue to offer due respect to clients as well as to the task of counselling and psychotherapy.

7. Checklist for Establishing and Maintaining Suitable Premises

7.1 Appendix A contains a checklist for establishing and maintaining suitable premises for counselling and psychotherapists.

7.2 The above checklist should be used by COSCA registrants to assess the suitability of their premises for counselling and psychotherapy.

Brian Magee
Chief Executive
COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)
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Appendix A: Checklist for Establishing and Maintaining Suitable Premises

Suitable Premises for Counselling and Psychotherapy		
Have you read COSCA's Guideline on the Suitability of Premises?	Yes	No
Is it easy and safe for clients to access your premises, including during the hours of darkness?		
Is the therapy room designed as a professional space?		
What public transport systems are available for clients?		
How convenient is parking for clients, including those who are disabled.		
Is the area around your premise busy or isolated?		
Do you provide the client with map/ directions?		
Is there a separate access to the therapy room?		
What is the impression created by the entrance to the premise?		
Where is the therapy room located within your premise and is it easy to access?		
What are the seating arrangements in: a) the waiting room b) the therapy room		

Are there items that should be concealed in the therapy room e.g. audio/visual equipment or personal items?	
Are there any possible sources of interruption (e.g. telephones, door bells)?	
What is the general noise level from outside and from within?	
Is the therapy room overlooked?	
If client information is kept on the premise, is it securely stored?	
Does the premise require to be insured for therapy sessions?	
Can the premise legally be used for therapy sessions?	
Do you have and follow a personal safety protocol?	