

Counselling with a vision

Diana Savage charts the growth of an inspirational service in Milton Keynes where team spirit is a significant feature

The vision behind the creation of the City Counselling Centre (CCC) in 1992 was that small counselling and support agencies could use shared facilities and reception, network with each other, and give people choices to meet their needs. Counsellors felt excited that they would have a purpose-built centre rather than the existing ad hoc space dotted throughout Milton Keynes. There was an optimistic and creative energy from all those involved in the beginning which has never been extinguished.

It is this energy that has been behind the development of new and innovative services for clients, enhanced everyone's personal development, and resulted in a place of work which is both satisfying and enjoyable. Clients feel safe, cared for and have their needs met while counsellors and volunteers feel part of something very special in Milton Keynes, where there is little extended family support and areas of considerable deprivation.

Milton Keynes (MK) Development Corporation, which initiated the centre, along with MK Council (MKC), was aware of the above factors and both encouraged and financed initiatives which would redress the balance. Its vision of the CCC was initially limited to cooperation between agencies, a 'one-stop shop' and shared facilities. However, the Centre generated its own vision, and despite some hard times financially, adopted the approach that 'all things are possible' if the need is there. More and more volunteers, both counsellors and welcomers (who work on reception), joined the CCC and contributed to the work, inspired and motivated by the optimism, energy and effectiveness of counselling. Different theoretical backgrounds worked side by side without conflict or anxiety.

From its inception, the management of the CCC was organised through a management committee made up of a representative from each member

organisation that used the facilities. These included Relate, Marriage Care, MK Bereavement Service, The Children's Society, Lesbian and Gay Link, National Schizophrenia Fellowship (NSF, now Rethink), Carers Project, Octagon, Mind, Family Mediation, and Parentline – mostly local branches of national organisations – together with many support groups including NORCAP, Miscarriage Support, Open Circle and UK SANDS.

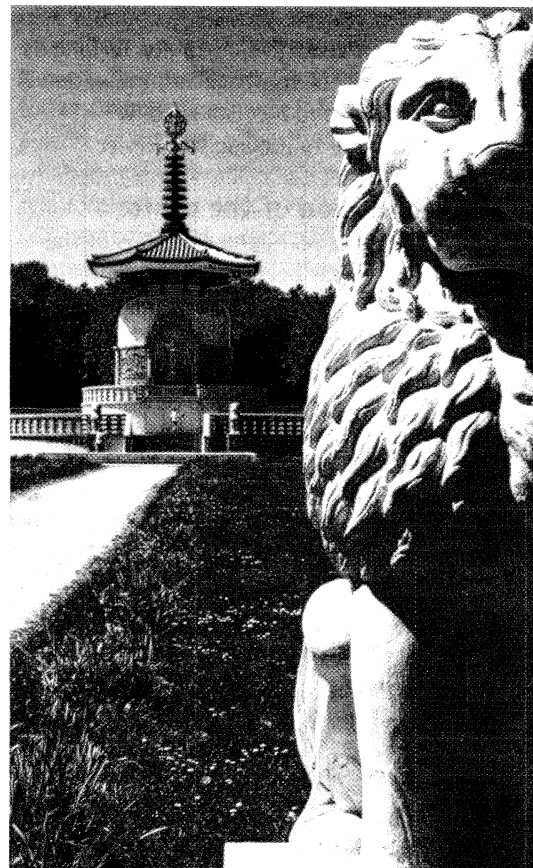
I was appointed as the coordinator from the beginning, having the task of managing the facilities and providing support to the organisations, recruiting and developing the volunteer receptionists, and exploring opportunities for counselling services where there was a need. It was a daunting task to undertake from scratch but it has been a privilege to work with so many committed and talented people over the years. We had very few paid hours initially – just six hours' administration and 20 hours' coordination! The administrator, Carolyn Sutton, and I developed a partnership which has grown and developed over the past 18 years, underpinning the work and financial stability of the organisation as it has expanded to the size and operational capacity of the present day.

New developments

Once established for its original purpose, it became apparent that clients did not always find it easy to decide on the most appropriate service for their needs. Speaking to a receptionist/welcomer, however kind and sensitive, was not appropriate. Hence, the drop-in service was born in 1993, providing a one-off session to help people understand counselling, explore their needs, and consider the most appropriate organisation to meet them. Initially, individual counsellors from the member organisations volunteered to offer drop-in counselling sessions on a rota

basis to help in this process.

Today we have 16 volunteer counsellors staffing the three drop-in sessions each week on a rota basis. These are now our most experienced counsellors, many of whom have been in the drop-in team for over 10 years. Most of these counsellors have been recruited directly onto the team rather than from the member organisations. They see between 500 and 700 clients each year, providing a triage system for counselling in Milton Keynes. All are self-referrals, a high percentage of which come from information given by GPs and other health professionals. However, our website and word of mouth also account for a larger proportion than in the past. This service has also led to the CCC being a valuable source of information on all other counselling, support and self-help services in Milton Keynes over the years.



ISTOCKPHOTO/THINKSTOCK