

## **ACCORD Catholic Marriage Care Service (ACCORD) 30/11/2016**

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*Submission on behalf of ACCORD to the Department of Health (DoH) in response to the Minister for Health, Mr Simon Harris, invitation to interested organisations to make representations to him concerning the proposed designation under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, of the professions of counsellor and psychotherapist.*

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### **A. INTRODUCTION**

ACCORD, as a registered charity, is committed to serving the needs of those members of the public experiencing difficulties in their marriage and relationships by providing a specialist counselling service through its network of 46 centres (including additional outreach centres) throughout the Republic of Ireland since 1975 which is a donation based service that is free to those not in a position to make a donation.

ACCORD's mission statement is: ***Empowering People, Fostering Relationships, Caring for Couples facing the Challenges of Christian Marriage.***

ACCORD recognises that a counselling service will invariably serve those members of the public, who, at the point in their lives are availing of counselling, can be deemed vulnerable. Consequently ACCORD is committed not only to serving the public, but also to protecting those members of the public availing of its counselling service. ACCORD has in place a Code of Ethics and Practice and a range of relevant policies and procedures in the interests of guiding its members and protecting the public.

In the absence of regulation ACCORD has at all times carefully monitored the selection, training, scope of practice, practice, supervision and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of its cohort of counsellors and has always encouraged counsellors to affiliate themselves with professional associations/accrediting bodies. Many ACCORD counsellors, some of whom may also maintain a private counselling and supervision practice, are members of a range of professional associations/accrediting bodies namely;

- National Association for Pastoral Counselling and Psychotherapy (NAPCP)
- Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)
- Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy (IAHIP)
- Family Therapy Association of Ireland (FTAI)
- Addiction Counsellors of Ireland (ACI)

- Association of Professional Counsellors and Psychotherapists (APCP)

ACCORD welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process and in the following pages 2-7 addresses the issues posed by the Department of Health in its invitation to interested organisations for representations and also addresses issues particular to ACCORD in the context of statutory regulation.

ACCORD is very strongly committed to the state regulation of counselling and psychotherapy and became a member of the Psychological Therapies Forum (PTF) from the outset in order to work with other professional associations/accrediting bodies in the interests of progressing the regulation of counselling and psychotherapy.

ACCORD sought and attended a meeting with DoH representatives on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015, to support the statutory regulation of counselling and psychotherapy. This meeting focused on the safety of the public and also the potential implications of regulation for ACCORD as a registered charity offering a marriage and relationship counselling service nationally which is donation based and free to those not in a position to make a donation

ACCORD also recognises that there are many differences of opinion on definitional and also scope of practice aspects of the two areas of practice among educationalists and professionals in the field and also amongst professional associations/accrediting bodies. The interchangeable use of both titles, counsellor and psychotherapist, has led to professional tensions and disagreements and regrettably confusion among the wider public and has inevitably delayed, frustrated, and complicated progress towards statutory regulation.

ACCORD is very strongly of the view that such disagreements among professional associations/accrediting bodies should not cause further delay in the commencement of regulation under the 2005 Act.<sup>1</sup>

Protection of the public interest must take precedence for DoH, CORU and all professional associations/ accrediting bodies and providers of counselling and psychotherapy training and services to the public, in the interests of the safety of the public accessing such services.

ACCORD also recognises that there is long standing and substantial disagreement between professional associations and accrediting bodies and maintains its stance of always being willing to discuss and collaborate on the titles to be protected with all interested parties for the purpose of achieving consensus and of progressing statutory regulation, in the immediate term, in the interests of public safety and professional practice.

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<sup>1</sup> ACCORD as a member of the PTF addressed this issue in a position paper submitted to QQI in 2013 on the development of Educational Award Standards in Counselling and Psychotherapy. The paper was designed to address this deficit and was based on the consensus of the 18 professional associations' members of the PTF at the time.

From the commencement of its marriage and relationship counselling service to the public ACCORD has been cognizant, proactive and vigilant in upholding the highest standards of training and professional practice in marriage and relationship counseling. ACCORD training for counsellors was provided on an in-house basis from 1975 to 2007. There were no other organisations offering comprehensive specialist training in marriage and relationship counselling at that time and ACCORD was supported in establishing appropriate training by its sister organization Marriage Care UK, established in the UK after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war in 1946.

Since 2007 and 2015, respectively, both of ACCORD's existing counsellor training programmes; the Higher Diploma in Counselling, (Marriage and Relationship) (a 3 year training programme which commenced in 2007) and the Certificate in Counselling, (Marriage and Relationship) (a 1 year training programme for qualified counsellors, which commenced in 2015) have been validated by St Patrick's College, Maynooth and are currently aligned to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at level 8. The National Association for Pastoral Counselling and Psychotherapy (NAPCP) recognizes ACCORD training for accreditation purposes.

ACCORD concurs with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) statement in the Awards Standards 2014, that educational qualifications alone do not equip counsellors/psychotherapists for professional practice and that the relevant professional standards must be agreed by the professional associations/accrediting bodies or the statutory regulating authority. ACCORD's current counsellor training programmes are validated by St Patrick's College, Maynooth and are aligned with the awards of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) at Level 8. ACCORD training is recognized by the National Association for Pastoral Counselling and Psychotherapy (NAPCP) for accreditation purposes. ACCORD courses also meet the IACP criteria for application for accreditation by counsellors/psychotherapists.

## **B. ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED AS RAISED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH - ACCORD RESPONSE**

### **1. Whether the professions of counsellor and /or psychotherapist ought to be subject to state regulation?**

The position of ACCORD is that counselling and psychotherapy should be subject to state regulation in the interest of the protection of the public for the following reasons:

1.1 ACCORD acknowledges that in the absence of state regulation of the professions of counselling/psychotherapy members of the public are potentially at risk from rogue providers and practitioners lacking both the

educational and professional requirements and standards needed to offer an ethical and safe service to those accessing counselling/psychotherapy services.

1.2 Self-regulation while laudable is complex and can potentially be fraught with a continuum of tensions existing between self-protection and protection of the public interest. While voluntary self-regulating efforts are commendable they have the potential to be perceived as inadequate in terms of addressing the difficulties that arise when the priorities of protection of the public clash with the priorities of self-protection and self-representation.

1.3 ACCORD acknowledges that many of the existing professional associations/ accrediting bodies in Ireland also wish to and endeavor to act simultaneously in the interests of clients and practitioners. However ACCORD contends that such competing priorities may potentially create a conflict of interest. ACCORD is equally of the view that it is challenging for professional associations and accrediting bodies to act collaboratively in the interests of their respective members and this has the potential to confuse and render it difficult for members of the public to understand the varying levels of training, qualifications and professional affiliations of those offering counselling/psychotherapy services thus leaving members of the public at risk of accessing services that may be neither adequate or appropriate for their needs.

## **2. Whether the professions ought to be regulated under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 or otherwise.**

ACCORD's position is that the most appropriate way for the state to regulate the professions of counselling and psychotherapy is under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act (2005). The regulatory framework, as set out in the 2005 Act, provides for the establishment and monitoring of a contract between professionals and the state to regulate a field of activity and a group of professional practitioners for the benefit of society. In this context, ACCORD welcomes the proposal that counselling and psychotherapy be regulated within a statutory framework which will privilege the public interest over professional interests.

ACCORD supports the Minister's preference of statutory regulation over voluntary regulation and the rationale for same as outlined on page 5 of the *Response to Minister for Health on Regulation of Counsellors and Psychotherapists* by CORU where it is referenced that with respect to voluntary registration organizations "*will need to show that in carrying out its voluntary register functions, public interest is paramount and that professional interests do not dominate or unintentionally subvert that interest*" (Professional Standards Authority UK on Accredited Voluntary Accreditation, 2013 quoted in *Response to Minister for Health on Regulation of Counsellors and Psychotherapists* document).

### **3. If the professions are to be regulated under the 2005 Act whether it would be appropriate to regulate one or two professions under one registration board?**

ACCORD as a member of the Psychological Therapies Forum (PTF), since its establishment in 2007, has supported the regulation of the two professions of counselling and psychotherapy under one registration board, with distinct educational entry and training requirements and protected titles.

As a member of the PTF since its establishment ACCORD has contributed to trying to distinguish definitions of counselling and psychotherapy in terms of entry levels, training, scope of practice and in so doing maintaining parity of esteem for both professions.

In the interests of best serving both proposed protected titles; psychotherapist, and therapeutic counsellor ACCORD proposes that given that one registration board may regulate two areas of practice and given the diverse professional opinions of both fields, it may be helpful to establish the inaugural registration board with a broader membership than the normal membership of 13. ACCORD recognises that this proposition may require legislative adjustment or amended regulations. The membership structure of an inaugural registration board could comprise 8 members from professionals engaged in the training, supervision and professional monitoring of counselling and psychotherapy and in addition 9 from other stakeholder groups representing the public interest.

### **4. The appropriate level of grand-parenting qualifications to be set for existing practitioners -having regard to the QQI Awards standards.**

Once registration is commenced it is vital that a robust, equitable and reliable standard and process of grand-parenting is agreed in order for confidence and authenticity to be maintained in professional standards applying to those in practice. Grand-parenting must be based on assuring and maintaining high standards of professional practice through a transparent structured process, the primary purpose of which is to protect the public.

ACCORD wishes to highlight its own unique situation in relation to grand parenting and submit a recommendation that would be applicable to ACCORD counsellors. A number of ACCORD counsellors, due to their long standing commitment to ACCORD and to their experience as marriage and relationship counsellors have worked with ACCORD for a long number of years, some in excess of 20 years. These counsellors were trained in-house to ACCORD standards at the time and continue to work with ACCORD clients in line with current ACCORD standards of practice and will, with the establishment of statutory regulation, be required to apply for grand parenting in order to continue to provide counseling on behalf of ACCORD.

ACCORD therefore proposes that its existing cohort of counselling practitioners who have undergone its training programmes, and have graduated as counsellors with ACCORD and are currently practicing as marriage and relationship counsellors with ACCORD should be eligible for grand parenting

within the **Route Two Schedule 3 qualifications** proposed by the PTF without having to supply any additional documentation. Those counsellors who have commenced training with ACCORD prior to the commencement of statutory regulation and who are working towards graduation with ACCORD should also be able to apply for grand parenting following graduation with ACCORD. In the absence of ACCORD counsellors not being able to avail of grandparenting, **the potential loss of counsellors to ACCORD could severely impact on ACCORD's ability to maintain its level of specialist marriage and relationship counseling service to couples and individuals throughout the country in need of support in their marriage/relationships (9,000 persons attended ACCORD for counselling in 2015)**

## **5. The appropriate level of qualifications to be set for future applicants for registration-having regard to the QQI Awards standards.**

5.1 It is the position of ACCORD that those wishing to use the title Counsellor or Therapeutic Counsellor should only be eligible to do so when educated to QQI Level 8 (or equivalent) and when their professional training meets with CORU standards or equivalent.

5.2 ACCORD supports Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in its understanding that those in training for the delivery of therapeutic practice must, in addition to attaining the relevant educational standards, also be afforded sufficient time for both simulated practice and placement, both of which are embedded components of ACCORD counsellor training programmes over many years. ACCORD contends that the only way a training body can ensure the readiness of any student to practice safely and ethically with members of the public and work towards accreditation or registration is that in tandem with achieving the relevant educational standards, trainee counsellors must have completed a sufficient amount of monitored and supervised simulated practice and placement in their area of specialization in addition to attaining an appropriate level of practitioner self-knowledge.

## **6. The title or titles to be protected for the exclusive use of registrants.**

6.1 ACCORD supports the protection of the professional titles of Psychotherapist and Therapeutic Counsellor.

ACCORD also recognises the differing positions of some professional bodies on the regulation of one or two protected titles and is available to enter into discussions and work to achieve consensus between professional bodies in the interests of progressing regulation at the earliest possible opportunity in the interests of public safety.

6.2 ACCORD strongly proposes that registered practitioners should be required to further identify and provide supporting documentation on the specialism of practice they have training and competence in which to offer a service. This is in the interests of transparency, clarity and for the



their respective accrediting/professional bodies. The cost of providing CPD training is a significant financial cost to organisations such as ACCORD who provide both CPD and supervision free of charge to its counsellors. ACCORD supports the CPD framework outlined by CORU in its CPD record template document. However Government funding received by ACCORD from TUSLA cannot be used for CPD purposes. Consequently such costs will be a significant financial burden to ACCORD as a charity providing a donation based service free to those not in a position to make a donation.

### **3. Registration and Scope of Practice for counsellors.**

ACCORD proposes to include scope of practice within the regulation/registration process as it has a direct bearing on the safety of the public who have an entitlement to trust that the practitioner to whom they present for a specific area of counseling/therapy has the requisite training and ongoing competence in that particular area; to do otherwise would be to potentially expose the public to a risk of incompetency, unsafe / unethical practice/ practitioners. Working within one's area of competence is significantly prioritized in ACCORD's Code of Ethics and Practice and also in the professional associations/accrediting bodies codes of ethics.

The current legislation does not appear to include specific regulation stipulations to cover scope of practice thus leaving open the possibility of harm to the public, thereby reducing the potential of statutory regulation to fulfill its primary aim to protect the public. ACCORD acknowledges that the requirements of principle based regulation as outlined in CORU's framework Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics recognises the significance of scope of practice but does not include provision to regulate scope of practice. ACCORD contends that this is insufficient and strongly proposes that each protected title also includes a scope of practice title. ACCORD counsellors would be registered as Therapeutic Counsellor-marriage and relationship.

The scope of practice of ACCORD counsellors is to work with couples and individuals experiencing difficulties in their marriage and relationships. There is no other organization in Ireland providing the level and length of training in the specialism of couple counselling. The Higher Diploma in Counselling Training Course is 450 hours plus and the Certificate in Counselling Training course is 108 hours plus in terms of class contact. Each course also includes a practicum (placement of 200 and 100 appropriately supervised client hours, respectively, prior to being eligible to graduate as a marriage and relationship counsellor. The core tutors are very experienced, trained and practicing tutors at PhD, MSc and BSc levels and are also practitioners in couple counselling over many years. Unfortunately it would appear that some practitioners in the public arena embark on working with couples without any or the requisite training in couple counselling to the potential detriment of those individuals and couples accessing relationship counselling with them.

**Ends**