

ASSOCIATION OF CHRISTIAN COUNSELLORS (ACC)

ANNUAL REPORT BY CHAIR OF REGISTER ADVISORY PANEL (RAP) OF ACC TO THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS AUTHORITY (PSA) FOR ACCREDITATION PERIOD APRIL 2021 – APRIL 2022

- 1) I have been a member of the RAP since 1 June 2017, when I was appointed to the role of Chair. The appointment was initially for a three-year term. In December 2019 I was invited by the ACC to continue in this role for a further three-year term, from 1 June 2020. The Terms of Reference (TOR) of the RAP state that the appointment of voting members to the RAP is for a period of three years, after which time voting members may be re-appointed for a further three-year period, at which point they must stand down. I will therefore be standing down as Chair of the RAP on 30 May 2023.
- 2) The current membership of the RAP with voting rights are: Dr. Heather Churchill¹ (HC), Doreen Rowland O.B.E. (DR); Richard Needle (RN), Fiona Stevenson (FS) and myself (Catherine Clarke). DR and HC were appointed to the RAP at approximately the same time as I was and, having agreed to serve a further three-year term from mid-2020, will therefore also be required to step down from the RAP in mid-2023. RN became a member in mid-2018, and FS became a member in September 2020. In 2021 RN agreed to serve a further three-year term as a member of the RAP, until mid-2024.

Although the recruitment of FS in 2020 introduced an element of RAP succession planning (*provided FS is willing to serve for the full two terms*), there is now an urgent need to address the issue of succession planning for the RAP, given that three of the five voting members will be required to retire next year. I am aware that the ACC leadership team have been canvassing members of ACC's ACCEnT group ("*ACC Ethnic Tapestry*", which

¹ Dr. Churchill was awarded a doctoral degree in psychotherapy (DCPsych) by Middlesex University in 2021. The title of her doctoral thesis was *From Pastoral Care to Professional Counselling: The Development of Higher Education Counselling Training Underpinned by a Christian Worldview and in Dialogue with Christian Faith/Religion/Spirituality*.

is a group within ACC for black and minority ethnic counsellors and pastoral care practitioners) given the importance of recruiting future RAP members from a range of ethnic backgrounds, but that these efforts have so far proved unsuccessful. In addition, I understand that, despite invitations to join the RAP having been advertised prominently in recent issues of ACCORD, ACC's quarterly newsletter, no expressions of interest have thus far been forthcoming. I have therefore asked the ACC leadership team to urgently consider how this succession planning issue can be escalated and resolved during the course of 2022.

- 3) During the accreditation period April 2021 to April 2022, the RAP held meetings on 18th June 2021, 24th September 2021, 10th December 2021 and 25th March 2022.² Each meeting lasted approximately 3 hours. On account of the Covid pandemic, the meetings held in June and September 2021 took place remotely via video conference.³ The meeting on 10th December 2021 took place "in person", and the meeting on 25th March took place remotely. Other than DR being unable to attend the meeting on 18th June 2021, and my being able to attend the meeting on 24th September 2021 (*on both occasions for medical reasons*) all voting members attended all of the above meetings, and thus each meeting was quorate.⁴
- 4) The above meetings were also attended by Sue Monckton-Rickett (ACC Chair), Kathy Spooner (ACC CEO), Dawn Sherry (ACC Registrar), and Gillian Stuart (ACC Head of Membership Services), each of whom is a non-voting member of the RAP.
- 5) The next RAP meeting is scheduled to take place on Friday, 17th June 2022.
- 6) The main work undertaken by the RAP during the above period is described in the published minutes of the above meetings, which are available on the ACC website at <https://www.acc-uk.org/the-acc-register/register-advisory->

² This accords with the requirements of the RAP's TOR, which stipulates a minimum of 3 meetings to be held each year.

³ This method of convening meetings is permitted under the RAP's TOR, once the Chair has given their permission.

⁴ Under the RAP's TOR, a quorum is three voting members.

[panel.html](#). Note, however, that the published minutes do not disclose confidential matters which were discussed at these meetings.

- 7) In my last annual report to the SRA, dated 11th May 2021, I stated that the focus for the RAP for the accreditation period 2021-2022 was as follows:
- To undertake its responsibilities as set out in its Terms of Reference;
 - To monitor ACC's implementation of matters agreed by the RAP; and
 - To be responsive to issues raised by ACC's Chair, CEO and/or Registrar in relation to the ACC's register, risk management and the protection of the public.
- 8) **I confirm that the RAP has undertaken its responsibilities during the past year in accordance with its Terms of Reference (TOR).**

The various tasks which the RAP is required to carry out, as set out in its TOR, are listed in the Appendix to this report for ease of reference.

- 9) During the April 2021 – April 2022 Accreditation Period, the main areas in which the RAP provided input to the ACC in respect of the ACC's Register of Members were as follows:

1.

ISSUE: Monitoring complaints and updating/refining Complaints Procedure (including new appeals process)

Background: Complaints are the most tangible information available in relation to practice issues, and it is therefore essential that the ACC's complaints procedure is robust, fit-for-purpose, and regularly reviewed and updated to take on board any learning points which may emerge. The complaints procedure was updated in 2019 and, at each quarterly RAP meeting since then, the RAP has been provided with a quarterly report of all "live" complaints, containing sufficient information (on an anonymised basis) to enable RAP members to ascertain that complaints are being progressed in line with the agreed processes and timelines. In 2019 the RAP recommended that the updated complaints procedure be reviewed by ACC after its first year in operation, and every two years thereafter, as well as requesting the production of an annual "year on year" report on complaints, in addition to the quarterly report provided in advance of each RAP meeting. The purpose of this additional report was to give the RAP a longer-term view of complaints, to assist in spotting trends and patterns and also to identify whether the number of complaints was decreasing/increasing over time.

At the RAP meeting held in June 2021, the RAP reviewed the first such year-on-year "Complaints Trends" report, which identified the number of complaints, the category of complaints, and the outcome of complaints, for the 2019, 2020 and 2021 calendar years.

In terms of the complaints process itself, following a recommendation by the PSA's accreditation team that the ACC design and document an **appeals process** as part of its complaints procedure, the ACC sought input from the RAP during the course of the current accreditation year as it designed and tested the new procedure. At the RAP meeting held on 24th September 2021, RAP members assessed the proposed procedure, and made a number of recommendations such as ensuring that the appeal process specified sufficiently clearly the **grounds** on which it would be possible to appeal a

decision. Complaints from clients can often relate to the **perceived result/outcome of the counselling they have receive**, rather than issues around ethics or service provision. Therefore, the appeals process needed to make clear that an alleged failure by ACC to follow due process would be grounds for lodging an appeal, but that mere dissatisfaction with the decision of the complaints panel would not. In addition, the RAP recommended that a flowchart be added to the appeal process document, and a member of RAP offered to assist in devising one.

In the December 2021 RAP meeting, when the further-updated complaints appeal process was being discussed, a query was raised by RAP as to whether an appeal could be made in respect of a **substantive** issue or if appeals could only be brought in relation to a failure to follow due process. ACC's Chair confirmed that the intention was that appeals could relate to substantive issues as well as process ones – e.g. if the report produced by the complaints panel had been factually inaccurate or misrepresented the situation in a significant way which had bearing on the outcome, or if new information had come to light following a decision having been made by the complaints panel. However vexatious appeals would not be permitted. It was agreed that the appeals process document would be amended to make clear the grounds on which an appeal would, and would not, be permitted to be brought.

In relation to the complaints procedure more generally, at the March 2022 RAP meeting, the members of the RAP were asked for their input on whether the parties could bring a “supporter” with them to the complaint panel hearing. The RAP recommended that both parties be given the right to do so, but that the supporters should not be given the right to address the panel – merely to take notes on behalf of the party they were supporting.

Outcome: Monitoring complaints and complaints procedure

During the 2021-2022 accreditation year the RAP provided input into the new appeal process for complaints, as well as providing input to the refining of the complaints procedure more generally. In addition, at each quarterly RAP meeting, the RAP undertook a review of anonymised complaints to enable RAP members to ascertain that complaints were being progressed in line with agreed processes and timelines, as well as reviewing, on an annual basis, the year-on-year trends in relation to complaints.

2.

ISSUE: Redesign of ACC database and website

Background: At the December 2021 RAP meeting, ACC's CEO informed the RAP that Image+, ACC's IT service provider, had recently advised ACC that system support for ACC's current website and database would be withdrawn in the coming months, and no future security updates would be released. ACC therefore had no choice but to initiate the procurement, at very short notice, of a new IT system. As a result, ACC was currently in the process of negotiating terms with Image+ for the development and implementation of a new IT system. However, the "upside" to this was that the replacement IT system would provide better functionality and an enhanced "shop-window", providing increased opportunities for ACC to grow membership streams. ACC will continue to use the current database whilst the new one is in development.

In response to a query from RAP about potential cost overruns on the procurement of the new IT system, ACC's CEO stated that there was a 10% contingency fund in place. ACC's Chair added that the cost could be absorbed by ACC's reserves. RAP advised that a Business Continuity document be produced, and that this be shared with the PSA, and also that a reserve be put in place for future IT upgrades. One member of RAP, who has experience of IT development projects, offered to help with the initial project governance and to attend a forthcoming meeting with Image+.

At the March 2022 RAP meeting, the RAP was advised that several meetings had subsequently been held with Image+, with a view to agreeing the precise scope of the project, and that ACC now been sent a revised version of the draft contract. In addition, the PSA had been advised of the proposed move to a new database and website. ACC had been assured by Image+ that the new system would be delivered by the end of 2022. RAP pointed out the importance of ensuring that dedicated IT support would be available from Image+ in the period following the deployment of the new IT system, and were advised that ACC had agreed an enhanced support package during the 90-day period following deployment. In addition, the final tranche of payment would not become payable until final acceptance.

Following the meeting, I offered to undertake a review of the draft contract⁵ in order to ensure that ACC's position was protected as much as reasonably possible, particularly in the areas of project duration, project cost and the quality of the service being provided by Image+. My proposed amendments were then incorporated in the contract negotiation with Image+.

Outcome: RAP interrogated issues in relation to the risks associated with the proposed IT procurement project, and provided legal input into the draft procurement contract on how to mitigate these risks.

⁵ I am an English-qualified solicitor, working in the City of London and also sitting as a judge on a part-time basis.

3.

ISSUE: Risk to ACC as a result of court case relating to MoU on Conversion Therapy

In January 2022, ACC received a letter before action advising it that proceedings would shortly be brought against it, and six other parties, alleging that, by virtue of the ACC being a co-signatory of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Conversion Therapy (2nd edition; 2017) the ACC had thereby aided the discrimination by a co-defendant, the London Centre for Psychodrama, of the claimant.

ACC sought my advice on the course of action to take. My advice was to check immediately whether their insurance cover included cover for the financial cost of defending a claim of this nature (and to advise their insurers of the claim), and also to appoint solicitors with expertise in civil liberties and human rights law, given the basis on which the claim was structured.

ACC subsequently liaised with their insurers and were advised that defending this claim **would be** covered under their insurance policy. ACC have instructed solicitors, and legal counsel, who are specialists in the area of civil liberties/human rights. As a result of having insurance cover in place, the potentially “existential” threat to ACC in terms of the costs associated with defending this potential claim has been effectively removed.

Outcome: Preliminary advice given by RAP to ACC leadership team on how to respond to claim. Threat of claim becoming an “existential” risk to ACC effectively removed by virtue of insurance policy being engaged in relation to legal costs of defending this potential claim.

4.

ISSUE: Membership audit/practice review: new arrangements

Prior to the beginning of the current accreditation year, the RAP had drawn the ACC's attention to the fact that in other professions (e.g. within the NHS) an audit is sometimes referred to as a "*revalidation process*" or a "practice review", and had suggested that this might be a helpful frame within which ACC registrants could view the audit process. ACC took this suggestion on board and advised the RAP at the June 2021 meeting that, in order to reduce stress on members, the "audit" process would, from January 2022, be rebadged as a "practice review".

The RAP also suggested that ACC introduce an option for members to carry out their own "*mini practice review*" - i.e. an online "self-audit" which members and their supervisor could carry out together. The ACC CEO agreed with this suggestion and said that, subject to Board approval, a proforma "mini practice review" checklist and guide for members would be drafted and published on the ACC's website, along with a communication to encourage members to undertake an annual "mini practice review" with their supervisor.

The RAP also suggested that the requirement to have a Christian sponsor as part of **both** the practice review process **and** the accreditation process be revisited. The RAP was subsequently advised (at the December 2021 meeting), that the requirement to have a Christian sponsor had been removed from the new practice review forms, and that there would also be a change to how members would be required to complete their CPD logs. Going forward, members would be required to submit three short pieces of reflection on: (1) What was going well in their practice? (2) In what ways has the member's practice developed? (3) Areas of growth, including reflecting on future CPD. Members would be advised to discuss these questions with their supervisor. The RAP also suggested including a sentence in the updated guidance document encouraging members to share the outcome of their practice review with their supervisor.

The RAP also suggested holding a members' forum in order to share information on, and respond to questions about, the new practice review process, as well as producing a video covering the same information. Finally, the RAP gave its support to the proposals to de-couple the practice review process from the annual renewal process, and to reduce the percentage of members audited from 10% to 5%.

Outcome: At RAP's suggestion, ACC is devising a mini-practice review for registrants to use each year with their supervisor, hosting a members' forum (in June 2022) focussing on the new practice review arrangements and planning to produce and circulate a video containing the same information.

5.

ISSUE: Regular review of ACC's Risk Register

Background: The ACC's Risk Register sets out the potential risks to the public resulting from the ACC's holding of an accredited register of counsellors, and how these risks may be mitigated. Alongside the "generic" risks associated with the counselling profession in general, ACC is required by the PSA to undertake an analysis of specific risks pertaining to the ACC and its members by virtue of being a Christian counselling professional body.

At the March 2022 RAP meeting, the RAP undertook a thorough review of the ACC's Risk Register and proposed a number of amendments, all of which were taken on board by the ACC.

Outcome: Risk Register reviewed by RAP as part of annual review process, and Risk Register amended to reflect RAP input.

6.

ISSUE: Regular review of ACC membership statistics to ensure ACC membership numbers remain at a sustainable level

Since 2020, arrangements have been put in place for the RAP to be sent a monthly update setting out the number of members joining and leaving the organisation, and their reasons for doing so, as a result of concerns around the potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the ability of ACC's members to meet clients in a face-to-face environment, and therefore to continue practicing within the counselling profession. In addition, a discussion of membership levels is included as a standing agenda item at each RAP meeting.

Rather than there being any fall-off in membership on account of the pandemic, the statistics show that the number of ACC members is actually on an upward trajectory during the 2021-2022 accreditation year. For example, at the RAP meeting held in September 2021, the ACC Registrar informed RAP that ACC had actually seen the highest growth in new members for many years, with an increase in newly-qualified members applying for registration as well as a number of overseas applicants. In addition, there had also been a growth in the numbers of students applying, possibly on account of ACC offering a £20 discount to Level 4 students for annual membership (£50 instead of £70) for those training with an ACC affiliate. RAP suggested that the ACC should also consider making a short video on the benefits of joining ACC, which ACC's CEO agreed to take forward. In addition, RAP also suggested that, in terms of its training offering, ACC should consider making some events available to ACC members only, in order to further encourage membership take-up, and to highlight to existing members the value of retaining their ACC membership.

Outcome: Regular updates on membership joiners/leavers are being provided to the members of the RAP, which indicate that membership numbers have increased during the 2021-2022 accreditation year. The RAP has made a number of suggestion on how to potentially further increase membership take-up.

7.

ISSUE: review of revised accreditation process (*in order to become an accredited counsellor*)

*Background: Entry to ACC's register of counsellors (i.e. as a **registered** counsellor) is subject to eligibility criteria which includes a minimum level 4 diploma in counselling. Becoming an **accredited** counsellor, and progression to senior levels, is subject to gaining further training and experience, and to undertaking an application process and essay/case study style submissions. In order to best serve ACC's members, employers and members of the public, ACC has undertaken a significant amount of work in establishing how it can assess the differentiation between a registered and an accredited counsellor. As a result of this exercise, during the current accreditation year the ACC has been trialling an enhanced assessment process in order for registered members to become accredited counsellors.*

At the September 2021 RAP meeting, ACC's CEO updated the RAP on the current status of the enhanced assessment process: the new Accreditation Assessment Form had been finalised and circulated to those assessors who will be piloting the new process. In place of the previous requirement for an essay, the form now required three pieces of reflective writing. Three members had been selected to trial the new accreditation application form/process.

Outcome: RAP updated on current status of pilot project to further differentiate between registered and accredited counsellor status.

8.

ISSUE: Submission to Professional Standards Authority (PSA) to demonstrate compliance with PSA Standard 1b (public interest considerations)⁶

Background:

ACC's CEO advised the RAP at the September 2021 RAP meeting that the PSA had recently revised its assessment criteria for registers, in respect of the benefits and risks of the activities undertaken by such registers. This requirement is set down in a new Standard 1b, which reads as follows:

1b) Public interest considerations

We will decide whether it is likely to be in the best interests of patients, service users and the public to accredit a register, with consideration of the types of activities practised by its registrants. This will include, but not be limited to consideration of the following:

i. Evidence that the activities carried out by registrants are likely to be beneficial.

ii. Evidence that any harms or risks likely to arise from the activities are justifiable and appropriately mitigated by the register's requirements for registration.

iii. Commitment to ensuring that the treatments and services are offered in a way that does not make unproven claims or in any other way mislead the public.

In order to evidence satisfaction of Standard 1b, ACC needed to, among other things, review research literature and any research trials which considered the value of Christian faith for those seeking counselling, in order to articulate the benefits of counselling and the ACC's "USP" - Christian counselling. HC offered to assist in identifying papers which demonstrated why faith can be of benefit in counselling outcomes.

⁶ See https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/docs/default-source/accredited-registers/standards-for-accredited-registers/accredited-registers-supplementary-guidance-for-standard-one.pdf?sfvrsn=3e5f4920_6

Outcome: RAP provided assistance in responding to PSA in relation to the provision of evidence of satisfaction of PSA Standard 1b.

9.

ISSUE: Review of ACC's Ethics & Practice Guidelines

At the June 2021 RAP meeting, ACC's CEO reported that one of the ACC's tasks for the coming year was a re-write of ACC's Ethics & Practice Guidelines. An Ethics & Risk Advisory Group had been set up to undertake this task. At the December 2021 RAP meeting, ACC's CEO reported that the rewriting exercise had stalled due to resourcing issues, and that consideration was being given to outsourcing this exercise. HC offered to provide feedback, when needed, and mentioned that one increasingly important aspect of ethics related to a member's social media responsibilities.

Outcome: Task of updating ACC's Ethics and Practice Guidelines identified as needing to be carried out during the forthcoming accreditation year. The RAP will provide input once an updated draft document has been produced.

10.

ISSUE: improving services provided to ACC members

At the RAP meeting held in June 2021, the RAP was provided with a summary of the priority tasks which had been agreed by the ACC Board for the forthcoming year, one of which was to improve the level of service being provided to ACC's members, including the streamlining of the registration and accreditation processes. This work is being carried out by Gillian Stuart (GS), who had recently been appointed as ACC's Head of Membership Services. At the December 2021 RAP meeting, the members of the RAP reviewed a draft version of a new "***Terms and Conditions of Membership***" document, setting out details of the different membership categories for prospective members. RAP suggested that the ACC's Statement of Faith be added as an appendix to the document. In addition, I offered to undertake a line-by-line editorial review of the document to assist in preparing it for publication, and submitted my markup shortly thereafter.

Outcome: RAP have provided input into the preparation of a detailed 30-page document setting out details of member categories and benefits.

11.

ISSUE: availability of CPD opportunities for ACC members

During the April 2021 – April 2022 Accreditation Period, the RAP also checked that the ACC was continuing to provide a range of CPD opportunities for its members (via online training) during the Covid pandemic. Having sought information from ACC on this issue, it was satisfied that ACC was providing a diverse program of CPD both for members and non-members, some of which were available for free, others for a reasonable fee with a member's discount.

Outcome: RAP satisfied that appropriate CPD opportunities are being made available to ACC members.

10) Looking forward to the next 12 months the RAP will continue to carry out the following roles:

- undertake its responsibilities as set out in its Terms of Reference;
- monitor ACC's implementation of matters agreed by the RAP; and
- be responsive to issues raised by ACC's Chair, CEO, and/or Registrar in relation to the ACC's register, risk management and the protection of the public.

I confirm that I am satisfied with the arrangements which have been put in place for the management of ACC's Register of Members for the accreditation period April 2021 – April 2022.

Catherine Clarke

Catherine Clarke

Chair of the ACC's Register Advisory Panel

27 April 2022

APPENDIX

Extract from Register Advisory Panel's terms of reference

Tasks of the Register Advisory Panel

- Review and approve proposed changes to the counselling ethics and practice standards and policies/guidelines⁷ of ACC's Register of Counsellors to ensure that they comply with the ethos of 'right touch regulation' and specifically the standards and requirements for accredited voluntary registration as published by the Professional Standards Authority (PSA).
- Ensure ongoing quality and integrity of registration, accreditation, audit and complaints processes (including the register application and renewal processes), ensuring compliance with equalities legislation.
- On a regular basis to review audit activity and outcomes to identify risks and issues which will drive standards, policies/guidelines, and process improvements.
- On a regular basis to review a summary of complaint activity and outcomes to identify risks and issues which will drive standards, policies/guidelines and process improvements.
- To review complaint appeals relating to compliance with process.
- On an annual basis to identify, review and evaluate risks as they apply to the Register.
- On an annual basis to submit a report for ACC's Board and for the Professional Standards Authority (PSA) on the work of the RAP.
- To consider the impact on ACC's register of relevant changes to the current regulatory system and advise accordingly.
- To support public engagement activities relating to ACC's register and the Professional Standards Authority work with accredited registers.

⁷ Practice Standards and Guidelines include but are not limited to ethics, CPD, supervision, insurance, record keeping, practice breaks, duty of candour.