

Press Release

Sandhurst Counselling Service to close at time of greatest national need

- **Sandhurst Counselling Service will stop counselling at end July as a result of Bracknell Forest Council stopping core funding after twenty years**
- **Voluntary Sector should be a key player in addressing the national mental health crisis which is driving the need to cut the costs of benefits**

For the past 35 years Sandhurst Counselling Service has offered support to the community of Bracknell Forest and surrounding area, and for over 20 years the charity has been supported by grants from Bracknell Forest Council amounting to about 40% of the annual running costs.

BFC has informed the charity that due to pressures on their own finances that all funding for SCS will cease effective 30th March 2025. The Trustees of SCS have carefully evaluated all options for continuing and concluded that the charity must stop all counselling by 31st July.

Ahead of today's announcements of reforms to the benefits system, Institute for Fiscal Studies² noted: "More than half of the rise in 16- to 64-year-olds claiming disability benefits since the pandemic is due to more claims relating to mental health or behavioural conditions. 1.3 million people claim disability benefits primarily for mental health or behavioural conditions – 44% of all claimants. A recent DWP survey suggests 86% of incapacity and disability benefit claimants report having a mental health condition (even if it is not their primary condition)."

"It is immensely frustrating to have to stop our services at this time" added Dave Percival. "The demand for services like ours has been rising inexorably for some years, and this was accelerated by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. Through out the life of this service we have always operated to the highest standards required by BACP and UKCP. The NHS has both a limited capacity and a limited offer – nearly 50% of our clients come to us from health sources (GP etc) – the value of what we do is recognised at grass-roots level."

The need to expand mental health recovery service provision to meet existing and future demand in our area is clearly stated in Bracknell Forest Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2026³. We have worked closely with BFC to meet this objective for the past five years.

In announcing cessation of counselling by 31st July Dave Percival, Chair of SCS Trustees noted: "This run-down period allows us to act responsibly and with due care for our clients and our practitioners. We are immensely proud of all that the charity done for over 35 years to support those who, for whatever reason, have needed to rebuild their mental health. It is humbling when our clients tell us "*'Counselling helped with my perspective on life. I now feel more confident in my ability to manage my life going forward.'* Another simply said "*Counselling helped me get my life back on track.* Every person we have helped also then impacts their family, friends, and colleagues."

We are very grateful to St Michaels church, Sandhurst, who founded the charity and who have provided the premises from which we operate, and to Bracknell Forest Council who have supported us with core funding for the past 20 years enabling the charity to grow through the pandemic to meet the current demand.

A recent Kings Fund Report⁴ states: "Despite progress in providing more mental health services in the community, there is still a sizeable gap between the number of people with mental health conditions and the number of people the NHS can treat. For example, the 2023–24 ambition for

1.9 million people in England to access talking therapy services equated to only around one-quarter of people with a diagnosed need.”

National figures show that for every £1 spent on mental health services the community benefits by £40. The costs of this decision will be felt for many years to come. The government has set its number one priority as driving economic growth. Getting those who cannot work due to their mental health challenges on a road to recovery should be a national priority, and the voluntary sector needs investment and support to be a part of the solution.

“Sandhurst Counselling Service should be part of the solution, instead of being cast aside through the failure of our public finances. There is still time if there is the political will”, said Dave Percival.

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Notes

- 1) Sandhurst Counselling Service is Registered Charity No 1143572. For Press Enquiries please contact the Chair of Trustees, Dave Percival, 07802 660524, dave.percival@btinternet.com
- 2) The IFS Report “The role of changing health in rising health-related benefit claims” can be found at <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/role-changing-health-rising-health-related-benefit-claims>
- 3) The BFC Health and Wellbeing strategy 2022-2026 can be found at https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/bracknell-forest-health-and-wellbeing-strategy-2022-to-2026_0.pdf - see page 34 in particular.
- 4) The full report “Improving access to out-of-hospital care” by Kings Fund (<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/briefings/improving-access-to-out-of-hospital-care>)