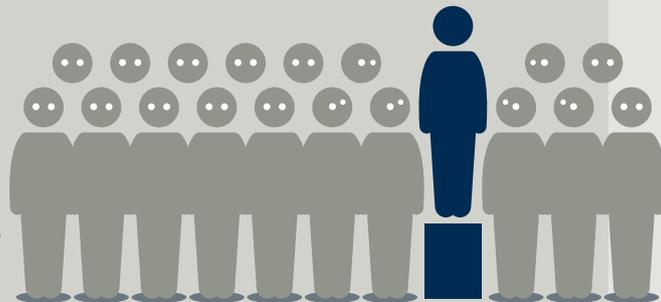


‘Stepping up to a clinical director role was a chance to meet the needs of the community’



In 2019 I was a group supervisor at South Bucks Counselling (SBC), a psychodynamic counselling service in High Wycombe. At that time the agency was in the doldrums and, following the departure of a clinical director, I was asked if I would like to apply for the role.

I had learned how to run my own practice, I liked the autonomy of working in private practice, and I wasn't sure if the principles I was free to pursue there would fit the agency, or if I would be able to manage the multiple relationships involved. But I also felt that I shouldn't overlook this opportunity.

My clinical interest is in understanding emotional dysregulation, in borderline states and emotionally unstable personality disorder, in the possibility that psychotherapy and counselling can help people see the ways in which their current emotional issues relate to experiences they have gone through. I felt that within the culture of the agency, silence and predominantly negative interpretations of the countertransference were overused. I wondered if I could live with that, or possibly lessen their dominance.

Instead of seeing people's problems as always being about their past, I think that frequently people struggle because they don't know where their lives are going. If you can help people to settle, then their emotional regulation tends to improve, and they can develop greater confidence and renewed self-determination. I could see that the clinical director role might provide me with an opportunity to scale these ideas up.

In 2019, SBC was shrinking and, if it continued that trajectory, looked set to close. Referrals and enquiries had all but dried up, and because the focus was on offering open-ended counselling only, there was very little space to allocate the clients who did apply.

We had become a kind of unhappy family, not a healthy thing for a counselling service to be. Within the agency we were disconnected from

one another, and the clinical director role had become marginalised.

However, the trustees were very supportive and encouraged me to have confidence. With their support, and through a process of carefully reviewing our purpose and ways of working, we managed to carry out a full-scale reset of how SBC worked. This was a team effort.

We put the needs of our community at the centre of everything we did. Instead of sticking doggedly to open-ended counselling, we chose to offer a range of time-limited frames, principally six-month contracts. We started to develop more confidence in ourselves and in our capacity to serve others. We started to find a way to be ourselves.

We invested in new technology to help us manage issues such as data protection. We were able to adapt to the unlikely opportunity that COVID-19 presented us with to renew and refresh our relationships with NHS, statutory and counselling charities like ourselves. We became better connected. SBC had turned into a backwater, a dwindling counselling agency, and we managed to change that - to stabilise it, just as we tried to play a part in stabilising the clients who came to see us.

There have been difficulties, but we continue to stick to the vision of becoming an agency that could be of more relevance to our local community. In 2019 we had 34 applications; by the end of 2021 we had 140.

So, three years on from 2019, how well has this worked for me, an autonomous psychotherapist? In short, the opportunity to contribute to the running of SBC has been a gift. I have found that the ideas that interest and excite me can work for an agency. Awareness of my limitations has also been important, and delegating responsibility to other talented people within the agency has been a rewarding part of the story of how I would say we have become a happier family. ■



About the author

Toby Ingham is Clinical Director of South Bucks Counselling in High Wycombe and a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and supervisor.