Handout 6: Interview Structure

Interviews may be categorised as structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. The first could be a tick-the-boxes questionnaire, which would by its nature set strict limits on the information collected. The latter could resemble a conversation, in which the interviewee may not even realise an interview has taken place. It takes a skilled interviewer to adapt their enquiries during the course of the interview to explore the issues they want to know about. Consider carefully in choosing the degree of structure appropriate for your interview - are you seeking to collect data for statistical manipulation (high structure) or to explore a client's issues from their perspective (low structure)?

Exploration - getting the interviewee to open up

The process of exploration contains a wealth of subtleties that if overlooked may result in key pieces of information remaining uncovered. The following format applies to a semi-structured (or even unstructured) interview.

At all times you need to:

- identify and evaluate what is occurring in a non-judgmental way
- make decisions about appropriate words, behaviour, and posture
- use responses that are culturally appropriate
- use active listening
- use paraphrasing
- demonstrate empathy

For an initial or a one-off interview there a number of additional considerations, such as declaring the purpose of the interview, and what consequences may follow if certain types of information are disclosed (for example the requirement to report abuse of children and young people). In an initial interview you may need to do all of the following:

To begin:

- establish rapport
- inform the interviewee of the purpose and format of the interview
- outline confidentiality and its limits
- outline your role and the role of the service

Then, as you do in any interview, elicit information by using:

- some closed, specific questions
- some open, exploratory questions
- probing questions to seek elaboration on certain issues
- hypothetical questions eg. questions that refer to a future or imaginary scenario
• silence, which allows the interviewee time for reflection and to prepare their response
• clarifying and summarising questions

At this point Problem Solving and Action Planning may be applicable. These approaches are outlined in Handout 12.

Finally, conclude the interview by:

• summarising your understanding of the content of the interview
• thanking the interviewee, and giving encouragement if appropriate
• acknowledge areas of agreement and disagreement
• explaining 'what happens next' - how the interview will be followed up, or the next step in the process