

Tips for setting up a private practice

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Preamble

This document could be useful for the following;

- Accredited Mental Health Social Workers who want to set up a private practice, or have already done so but would like some further information; or
- Social workers who are not accredited, but are thinking about setting up a private practice.

Please note this document, is not an exhaustive list nor should it substitute legal or business advice.

Steps

Step 1. Obtaining business advice

The AASW recommend that you consult with an accountant or financial advisor prior to and throughout the initial steps of setting up your business, and specifically developing the most appropriate business practice structure.

There are no specific AASW requirements, regarding setting up a private practice. However, there are specific business and legal requirements including;

- You must maintain an Australian Business Number and
- You must maintain professional indemnity and public liability insurance. If you are a member of the AASW, you are covered for this type of insurance.

Australian Business Number

- You will need to apply for a business number through the Australian Taxation Office. Please click [here](#) to be redirected to the ATO website. Depending on your individual situation you may need to apply for a business number and work out which registrations you will need. The ATO will explain this in further detail.
- If you already have a business number or have had one previously and it is not active, you will need to inform the Australian Taxation Office of any change to purpose of business or to reinstate.

Goods and Services Tax

- You must be registered for GST if your business turnover is \$75,000 or greater. If the turnover is less than \$75,000 you can voluntarily register for GST, but it is not mandatory to register.
- Please refer to the Australian Taxation Office for queries in relation to whether the type of service you provide attracts the Goods and Services Tax.

Insurance

As a member of the AASW, social workers can choose to be covered for the following:

- Public and products liability insurance to \$20 million. This covers you if you negligently caused an injury to a third party or damage to the property belonging to a third party.
- Professional indemnity insurance to \$10 million. This covers you against claims of professional negligence as a qualified social worker.

This insurance is provided by Berkley Insurance Australia; both policies have been arranged by Sear Insurance Brokers.

This insurance only covers you when you are engaged in social work activities. The policies cannot be altered to include non-social work activities you might engage in as part of your private practice. If you require clarification around what constitutes a social work activity, please contact the AASW (03) on 9320 1044 or: ethicsconsult@asw.asn.au.

There are other types of insurance that you may wish to consider:

- Worker's compensation insurance;
- Income protection insurance; and or
- Total permanent disability insurance

These types of insurance would need to be arranged independently, as this is not included as part of the current AASW member insurance policies. Please note, that you may already be covered for these types of insurance in accordance with your superannuation policy or mortgage insurance policy, refer to

your policy providers for further detail.

Step 2. Attaining a Medicare provider number

There are a number of allied health professionals that can provide services under Medicare. Accredited Mental Health Social Workers and social workers who have completed the [non directive pregnancy support counsellor](#) training are included in the list of professionals that can apply for a Medicare provider number.

An application for a Medicare provider number can be accessed by going to: <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/health-professionals/forms/hw063>

A provider/registration number uniquely identifies the health professional and the location from which a service is rendered.

If you are planning on providing services from more than one location (for example your home and rented office space, you would need to apply for an initial Medicare provider number and then apply for an additional location Medicare provider number. If you are considering providing services from another site you will need to apply for a second additional location Medicare provider number and so on).

An application for an additional location Medicare provider number can be accessed by going to: <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/health-professionals/forms/hw020>

If you are planning on providing services from your home and conducting client home visits, then you would need to apply for one provider number, listing your home as the 'required location' in section 5 of the application for Medicare provider number for allied health professional.

Step 3. Developing systems to support your therapeutic work

There are a number of skills in which a social worker must have or acquire, in order to run a successful private practice. In addition to providing therapeutic interventions, a social worker interested in private practice needs to develop:

- a system/database to monitor client load,
- system for invoicing, that has capacity to incorporate potential Medicare or other agency information, if clients are accessing the Medicare or other agency rebate.

These two systems should be set up in the initial stages. Accountants may be able to provide advice about the systems for invoicing, and specifically what details should be included in an invoice. If you are not comfortable with computers and software, it may be worthwhile arranging for someone to show you how to use Excel or other types of software that you may establish your systems with.

Payment for services

You will need to make decisions about how much to charge for your services. Many social workers ideally want to be able to provide a service at minimal or no cost to the client. Can you afford to do this? For Accredited Mental Health Social Workers, the Medicare rebate provides a figure to work from, can you afford to provide a service for the rebate alone?

Processing payments

If you are a Medicare provider you will need to consider how you want to process your Medicare billing.

- Online: there is software and technical support accessible for a monthly fee. There is a [list of 'vendors'](#) that provide Medicare online claiming software. Medicare are not in a position to

recommend one vendor over another, some vendors specialise in providing a service for Allied Health professionals.

- Alternatively you may choose to use an EFTPOS or HICAPS machine. These can be expensive and you will need to contact either: ANZ, Commonwealth, Westpac or NAB, to arrange this service.
- If you decide to complete the paperwork by hand, this can lengthen the time in which it takes for Medicare to pay the rebate.

Step 4. Considering a location for your practice

Private providers can find it helpful for market penetration to be located in or close to GP clinic or community health centre, particularly if you are relying on referrals from medical practitioners to generate business.

Other things to consider when determining a location for your practice

- Proximity to services (ie: public transport)
- What is the cost of renting rooms/suites, and is this cost in your business plan?
- Is electricity/water included in the rent?
- What other business activities surround your location?
- Is your office easy to find?
- Is there parking?
- Does your office have disability access?
- Is it safe?
- Have you researched the region?
- How many other practitioners are established in the area?
- Is there a service gap?
- Do you want to be providing services in an area that is close to home or your family/friends?

There are a number of issues to consider if you are contemplating providing services from your home:

- Do you have council permission? Medicare are hesitant at issuing provider numbers to professionals practicing from home, for a variety of reasons. Council permission is one area in which Medicare may ask you to demonstrate you have in order to issue a provider number to a home residence. Requirements vary between councils; you may need to apply for a permit. You will need to verify with your local council as to whether your business will comply with local zoning regulations.
- Safety, security and boundaries – if you work from home your clients will know where you live.
- Confidentiality and privacy – If you work from home; you need to consider the confidentiality and privacy of your clients in terms of the presence of family members and neighbours. Ensure clients can access your premises discreetly and that you ensure adequate sound proofing.

Step 5. How to advertise your business

Consider a strategy for advertising/marketing your business or simply a way to let people know your services are available.

Advertising will likely depend on the type of practice you choose to set up and who your referrals will come from. For example if you want referrals from General Practitioners (GPs) then we would recommend that you meet/introduce yourself to the local GPs. You could also provide the GP/or referrer with printed material or business cards. It is also possible to approach organisations to sub contract your services for specific group work.

If this is something you are interested in, it would be salient to research what organisations are in your local area of practice and whether they would be interested in such an arrangement. There are a range of agencies that engage Accredited Mental Health Social Workers such as Victim Services, DVA and Workcover.

We would suggest that social workers develop a business plan for their private practice, so that they know how they want to operate and don't face some unforeseen problems. Again this would be worthwhile discussing with your accountant/business advisor.

Helpful weblink: <http://www.business.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>

Marketing

You can add your details via the AASW's advanced search directory: [Create a listing in the AASW Advanced Search Directory](#).

Once you have added your details, they will be listed on the AASW website, which can be easily accessed by someone looking to access your services. You can update these details at anytime via your AASW membership, by clicking on 'Member Centre' and clicking on the 'Manage your listing in our Find a Social Worker directory' option, make the changes required, click save and exit.

If you are skilled in providing services in a particular field – make sure this is clearly written, and that potential referring practitioners are aware of your skill set. For example if you have experience in working with children – be sure to promote this.

You could also consider the following options to market your skills:

- Set up a website;
- Arrange business cards;
- Develop a presentation to promote your services and expertise, presentation could be targeted towards GP's and or other potential referrer's

Step 6. Ethical and legal considerations

There are lots of ethical and legal obligations to consider when setting up a private practice. A few key areas to consider:

- The AASW has developed a range of Ethical and Practice Guidelines and resources for social workers that expand upon the Code of Ethics and Practice Standards to discuss common or topical ethics and practice issues from a practical point of view: Please refer to the following section of the website for further information: <http://www.aasw.asn.au/practitioner-resources/ethical-guidelines>

- Medicare has particular reporting requirements depending on the program you are providing services under. Better Access fact sheet can be accessed [here](#). Operation guidelines for ATAPS can be accessed [here](#). Please refer to Medicare for specific questions depending what program you are providing services under.
- Do you have a valid working with children check?
- Some referring agencies (DVA for example) may require you to undergo a Federal Police Check.
- Are you aware of the mandatory reporting responsibilities for your area/state?

Step 7. Self care

- Make sure you maintain a work and personal life balance, allowing time for you things including; exercise, down time, friends, family, hobbies etc.
- Supervision is considered an important aspect to a successful private practice. Supervision can also be recorded in your annual log for Continuing Professional Development requirements. Supervision is part of category one – reflection, ethical practice and career development. Social workers can advertise themselves on the advanced search directory as providing supervision. This might be a helpful tool to use to find a social worker in your area or who is available via phone/internet for consultation;
- Keep in touch with colleagues;
- Try and attend or involve yourself in groups/committees/activities, this is a great opportunity for networking. AASW Branches often hold activities which could be useful for private practitioners. If there aren't any available in your area, you could contemplate starting a group, your local branch office manager might be a useful source to speak with regarding this. Consider signing up for Mental Health Practitioners Network (MHPN), <http://www.mhpn.org.au/> which will give you the opportunity to take part in an interdisciplinary network.

Step 8. Maintaining your Medicare provider number and AMHSW status

Once you have been assessed by the AASW, and issued with certificates confirming you are an Accredited Mental Health Social Worker, you can apply to Medicare for a provider number.

You must maintain your Accredited Mental Health Social Worker membership with the AASW, and meet ongoing Continuing Professional Development requirements, to remain eligible to provide services under Medicare.

The Accredited Mental Health Social Worker membership is renewable at the same time as normal AASW membership, per financial year (1st of July to 30th of June). Should you not renew your AASW membership and your AMHSW membership, Medicare will be notified, this will affect your ability to claim for services after the date in which Medicare are informed.

Accredited Mental Health Social Worker Continuing Professional Development requirements are outlined in the AASW [CPD Policy](#).