

THE GATEHOUSE POLICY: Professional Boundaries

Policy ID Number: P01

Policy Passed by Board of Trustees: January 2015 Valid until: January 2020

- **Introduction**

- These guidelines apply to all staff, volunteers and students on placement at The Gatehouse.
- The term "Staff" refers to a person who has paid employment at The Gatehouse.
- The terms "Volunteer" and "Student" refers to a person who donates their time or efforts to The Gatehouse without being paid.
- The term "Guest" refers to a person using The Gatehouse services.
- The range of relationships between the two groups will vary from business-like to more informal. It is important that these guidelines are viewed in the context of the sort of professional relationship that exists with Guests.

- **Setting the Scene**

- Staff are required to maintain professional boundaries throughout the relationship with Guests. In any work setting, there is an unavoidable imbalance in the staff/Guest relationship with the staff member at times having access to personal information about the Guest, which the Guest would not normally share with anyone other than trusted family or close friends. This could result in the Guest wanting the staff member to fulfil the role of 'close trusted friend' or the staff member feeling a need to fulfil this role.

- If a personal friendship is formed, it is very likely to have damaging effects on the working relationship. The staff member may lose the ability to remain objective, because personal thoughts and feelings towards the Guest intrude on the primary task of always acting in their best interests. The Guest may lose the ability to discuss the needs honestly as they are concerned about how this will affect the staff member's feelings. The effects on the Guest may be devastating, so in order to avoid this situation, staff are required to maintain professional boundaries throughout the working relationship.

- **Definition of Boundaries**

- Boundaries are the framework within which the staff and Guest relationship occurs. Boundaries make the relationship professional and safe for the Guest, and set the parameters within which services are delivered. Professional boundaries typically include, time and venue of interaction with the Guest, personal disclosure by staff, limits regarding the use of touch, and the general tone of the professional relationship.

- The primary concern in establishing and managing boundaries with each individual Guest **must be in the best interests of the Guest**. Except for behaviours of a sexual nature or obvious conflict of interest activity such as abuse, boundary considerations often are not clear-cut matters of right and wrong. Rather, they are dependent upon many factors and require careful thinking through of all the issues, always keeping in mind the best interests of the Guest. This is best done in a team approach where peer input can help maintain objectivity and this in turn will promote consistency with the Guest by the staff team and avoid confusion or blurring of the boundaries.

- **Implications**

There are a number of areas in which it is essential to maintain boundaries. Below are some typical areas that can present difficulties.

- **Self-disclosure:** This is only appropriate if it is in the best interest of the Guest e.g. demonstrating real empathy by sharing a similar personal experience.
- **Giving or receiving significant gifts, services or favours:** This may cause the recipient to feel obligated to behave differently with the gift giver or give/expect 'special' care.
- **Dual and overlapping relationships:** Where this is an issue, it is essential that this made explicit and discussed with a senior staff member. For example, a new Guest may be someone you have met in another work/social context.
- **Becoming friends:** Generally, staff should avoid becoming friends with Guests and should refrain from socializing.

Although there are no explicit guidelines that prohibit friendships from developing once support has terminated, staff must consider this very carefully. In assessing the appropriateness of this for the individual Guest, it is recommended that the issue is discussed with a senior member of staff, to identify any potential conflict of interest. This is because potential imbalances may continue to exist and influence the Guest, well past the termination of the formal working relationship.

Due to the transient nature of the Guests using the service, confirmation is needed to ensure that the Guest is not a current user of the service.

- **Maintaining established conventions:** Avoid providing support in social rather than professional settings such as giving personal telephone numbers to Guests or having contact with Guests out of work hours in order to provide support.
- **Physical contact. E.g. hugs or touching:** Staff must recognise diversity of cultural norms and realise that such behaviour may easily be misinterpreted.

- **Filters to avoid violating Professional Boundaries**

The following are examples of filters staff could use to assess whether their acts or interventions are within appropriate professional boundaries:

Ask yourself -

- Would I do this for/with every Guest I work with? If the answer is 'no', is it possible that you are inappropriately favouring this Guest over others?
- Is this work related and in work hours? If the answer is 'no', have you considered referring the Guest to a suitable service or way of meeting this particular need and not doing it yourself?
- Is this a work venue or a venue permitted by work? If the answer is 'no', what about referring the Guest to a suitable service or way of meeting this particular need rather than doing it yourself?

- Would I feel comfortable offering or accepting this kind of behaviour in front of my colleagues or the other Guests? If the answer is 'no', you are probably violating professional boundaries.

- Does my line manager know about this and agree to it? If the answer is 'no', you definitely need to discuss it with them, preferably in advance.

- Is this in line with our agreed ethos and service approach? If not, you will need to check this with colleagues.

- Is it part of my job to get into this territory? Am I giving this person the answer they want rather than the answer they need? If you are not sure, you need to talk to the other people involved with the Guest.

- **How to monitor Professional Boundaries**

- Self reflection and review

- Informal discussions amongst colleagues and peers

- Supervision discussions

- Peer monitoring and reporting of concerns

- Staff meetings and discussions

- Violation of professional boundaries is a slippery slope that staff seldom intentionally set off on. However, things can quickly spiral out of control and staff are often taken by surprise, as they did not expect the situations that arise. These usually take the form of a complaint or allegation against them by the affected Guest, support worker or by their colleagues.

- As The Gatehouse services are for people who maybe considered 'vulnerable adults', any allegation against a staff member will be investigated, as required by The Gatehouse Safeguarding policy. Depending on the nature of the allegation, the staff member may be suspended from duty whilst the matter is investigated and an outcome determined. If the allegation is sound and is shown to be of a serious nature, this is likely to result in termination of employment. Please refer to the disciplinary policy regarding this process.

- Any allegation against a volunteer or student will be referred to the Volunteer Co-ordinator to investigate. If the allegation is sound and is shown to be of a serious nature, this will then be referred onto the Project Director.