



The Gatehouse Professional Boundaries Policy

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Introduction

The Gatehouse is a community drop-in centre offering free support services for adults who are; homeless, vulnerably housed, on low income and/or looking for company & community. The Gatehouse offers a free community centre with a cafe (six evenings a week), therapeutic and practical workshops, a shower and clothing service, a counselling service, one-to-one casework support and facilitates the Lived Experience Advisory Forum in partnership with Aspire and Oxfordshire Homeless Movement. For more information please see <https://oxfordgatehouse.org/>

Overview

The Gatehouse often works with people who are experiencing multiple disadvantages, barriers and safeguarding needs. These guidelines apply to all staff, volunteers and students on placement at the Gatehouse. The term 'staff' refers to all people in paid employment working 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.

- 1.1. The range of relationships between the different groups can 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 of the Gatehouse.**
- 1.2. Fundamentally, it is the role of staff, volunteers and students to uphold professional boundaries with any Guest who uses the Gatehouse. Professional boundaries are in place to safeguard the professional, the Guest and the organisation as a whole.
- 1.3. Staff, volunteers and students 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.
- 1.4. Implementing professional boundaries can often feel uncomfortable especially due to the holistic informal approach that the Gatehouse uses. Ensure that any concerns are disclosed and discussed with your line manager, so that you gain the support that you and a Guest might need throughout the process.
- 1.5. If a personal friendship is formed with a Guest, it is very likely to have damaging effects on the working relationship. The staff member, volunteer or student 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.

- 1.6. If professional boundaries are 'loosened' it can give mixed messages to the Guest in question and impact other Guests if preferable treatment to all isn't deemed as 'fair.'

2. Definition of Boundaries

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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.

3. Implications

- 3.1 There are a number of areas in which it is essential to maintain boundaries. Below are some typical areas that can present difficulties.
- 3.2 **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.
- 3.3 **Giving or receiving significant gift, services or favours:** This may cause the recipient to feel obligated to behave differently with the gift giver or give/expect 'special' care.
- 3.4 **Dual and overlapping relationships:** Where this is an issue, it is essential that this is made explicit and discussed with your line manager. For example, a new Guest may be someone you have met in another work/social context.
- 3.5 **Becoming friends:** Generally, staff, volunteers and students should not become friends with Guests and should refrain from socializing.

Although there are no explicit guidelines that prohibit friendships from developing once support has terminated for the Guest, 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 your line manager, 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 some of the Guests (a Guest may stop using the service for a while and later return) confirmation is needed to ensure that the Guest is not a current user of the service.

- 3.6 **Unhealthy attachment to any one particular staff member, volunteer or student:** If this occurs this can eventually become both distressing to the professional and the Guest. This must be raised to your line manager, be monitored and everyone involved to follow clear bounded instructions. The boundaries may feel uncomfortable to follow but by not doing so, you could put yourself and the Guest at more risk longer term.

4. Maintaining established conventions:

- 4.1 Do not provide support to Guests in social rather than professional settings such as giving personal details e.g. telephone numbers, home address, to Guests or having contact with Guests out of work hours in order to provide support.
- 4.2 This includes accepting Guests as friends/or interaction on social media.
- 4.3 Physical contact e.g. hugs and touching shouldn't occur. Staff must recognise diversity of cultural norms and realise that such behaviour may easily be misinterpreted.

5. 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, policies and service approach? If not, you will need to check this with your line manager.

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.

6. How to monitor Professional Boundaries:

Self-reflection and review.

Informal discussions amongst colleagues and peers.

Supervision discussions with your line manager.

Peer monitoring and reporting of concerns.

Staff meetings and discussions.

- 6.1 Violation of professional boundaries is a slippery slope that staff, volunteers and students seldom intentionally set off on. However, things can quickly spiral out of control and staff, volunteers and students 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.
- 6.2 As the Gatehouse services are for people who may be considered 'vulnerable adults', any allegation against a staff member will be investigated, as required by the Gatehouse Safeguarding Vulnerable

Adults 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.

- 6.3. Any allegation against a volunteer or student will be referred to the Operations Manager to investigate. If the allegation is sound and is shown to be of a serious nature, this will then be referred onto the CEO.

7. What do I do if my professional and personal boundaries are being breached?

Talk to your line manager as soon as possible and follow this up in writing.

8. How to monitor Professional Boundaries between staff/colleagues and volunteers/students

- 8.1. Although there are no explicit guidelines that prohibits physically intimate relationships from developing between a **staff member** and a **volunteer/student** (18+) at the Gatehouse, there does need to be some consideration of the imbalance between a staff member (being paid for their role) and the volunteer/student (being unpaid for their role), as well as the potential conflict of interest at work.
- 8.2. Staff members at the Gatehouse are encouraged to disclose to their line manager if a physically intimate relationship with a current volunteer has started and they will be treated without judgement and in confidence (unless there is a risk to self or others or a safeguarding vulnerable adults/children concern). Please read the Gatehouse Confidentiality and Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults policies.
- 8.3. The above also applies to physical intimate relationships between staff members, particularly if one staff member is in a more senior/line management role and where a potential conflict of interest could arise.

Things for staff to consider:

Will it affect the way I work/treat the volunteer/student/colleague compared to other volunteer's/students/team members?

Do I have a line management relationship with my colleague?

How will I manage the working relationship if there is conflict or the relationship breaks down?

Talking to your line manager can help support the process in a transparent, open way and help offer solutions to any potential conflict at work.

Katrina Horne

CEO

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