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 seeking community. Services include a community café, workshops, shower and clothing service, counselling, casework, and facilitation of the Lived Experience Advisory Forum in partnership with Oxfordshire Homeless Movement.

We work with people experiencing multiple disadvantages, barriers, and safeguarding needs. Clear professional boundaries are vital to ensure safety, fairness, and consistency for Guests, as well as safeguarding staff, volunteers, students, and the organisation. We recognise that in a small city we may come across our guests and service users outside of our role and this policy guides the approach expected from staff and volunteers while understanding that there can be times when these rules cannot be followed and expect these to be raised with a manager and documented to ensure professional boundaries are in place.

This policy should be read alongside the Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Policy, Confidentiality Policy, Equality & Diversity Policy, Disciplinary Policy, and Whistleblowing Policy.

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’ refer 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.

Fundamentally, it is the role of staff, volunteers and students to uphold professional boundaries with any Guest. Professional boundaries are in place to safeguard the professional, the Guest and the organisation as a whole.

Digital, online, and social media interactions are now common. Professional boundaries apply equally in virtual spaces.

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, the mode of communication (in person, by phone, or digital/online), and the general tone of the professional relationship.

The primary concern in establishing and managing boundaries with each Guest must be in the best interests of the Guest. Except for behaviours of a sexual nature or obvious conflicts of interest such as abuse, boundary considerations are not always clear-cut. Team input and line manager supervision help maintain objectivity and consistency.

Implications

- **Self-disclosure:** Only appropriate if in the best interest of the Guest (e.g. demonstrating empathy and building a positive professional relationship).
- **Gifts, services or favours:** Staff, volunteers, and students should not give or receive gifts of more than nominal value (e.g. small token items such as a card or low-value food item may be acceptable). Any offers of significant gifts must be declined and reported.
- **Dual/overlapping relationships:** Must be disclosed and discussed with a line manager.
- **Friendships:** Staff, volunteers, and students should not become friends with Guests during service use. Post-service friendships should not begin until at least 6 months after service use ends and require management oversight. Existing friendships or relationships must be declared with a manager and documented.
- **Attachment:** Unhealthy dependency should be raised with a line manager and managed with clear boundaries.
- **Digital Boundaries:** Do not connect with Guests on personal social media, use personal phone numbers, or direct messaging. All communication must go through Gatehouse-approved channels. **Do not share or post images, photos, or videos of Guests online under any circumstances.**
- **Conflict of Interest:** Any known personal/social overlap with Guests must be declared for recording.

Maintaining Established Conventions

Do not provide support to Guests in social rather than professional settings, such as giving personal contact details or having out-of-hours contact. This includes social media connections or interactions.

Physical contact, including gestures such as hugs, should generally be avoided in professional settings. While some individuals may offer or welcome physical contact as a form of comfort or connection, staff must exercise professional judgement and be mindful of the potential for misinterpretation or boundary-crossing.

Any physical contact should only occur when necessary for safeguarding, practical support, or in exceptional circumstances, and should be proportionate, respectful, and clearly understood by all parties. If physical contact occurs and feels unusual or raises concern, it should be documented and reported in line with safeguarding procedures.

Staff should also be aware of and sensitive to cultural diversity, recognising that behaviours and boundaries may be interpreted differently across backgrounds. Maintaining clear, respectful, and professional boundaries helps ensure a safe and inclusive environment for everyone.

Filters to Avoid Violating Professional Boundaries

Ask yourself: - Would I do this for every Guest? - Is this work-related and in work hours? - Is this in a permitted work venue? - Would I feel comfortable if colleagues or Guests observed this? - Does my line manager know and agree? - Is this in line with our ethos and policies? - Could this action be misinterpreted due to cultural differences or vulnerabilities?

How to Monitor Professional Boundaries

Boundaries are monitored through: - Self-reflection and review. - Informal peer discussions. - Supervision with line managers. - Peer monitoring and reporting. - Staff meetings and discussions. - Annual refresher training. - Recording and addressing low-level concerns early.

Violations can escalate quickly, often unintentionally, and may result in allegations or complaints requiring investigation.

Breaches and Allegations

If boundaries are being breached, speak to your line manager as soon as possible and follow up in writing. If your line manager is unavailable or involved, escalate to the Services Manager or CEO.

Allegations involving staff will be investigated under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults Policy and may lead to suspension and disciplinary action. Allegations involving volunteers/students will be investigated by the Services Manager and, if necessary, referred to the CEO.

Repeated or persistent low-level breaches may also lead to disciplinary action, even if no safeguarding concerns are raised.

Boundaries Between Staff, Volunteers, and Students

While relationships are not prohibited, the power imbalance between paid staff and volunteers/students must be recognised. Any physically intimate relationship must be disclosed confidentially to a line manager. Staff must not participate in rota decisions, case management, or disciplinary actions involving someone with whom they have a personal relationship.

Staff, volunteers, and students should generally avoid any contact with Guests or former Guests outside of their professional role until the individual has ceased using the service for at least six months. This includes social contact, personal communication, and digital or online interaction. Any unavoidable contact, or any situation in which this expectation cannot reasonably be upheld, must be discussed with a line manager and documented to ensure that professional boundaries remain clear and transparent.

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

Boundaries must be applied consistently to all Guests. Staff should remain aware of cultural differences in communication, touch, and relationships. Adjustments may be made for accessibility or safeguarding needs, but only with line management oversight. Please refer to the Equality, Diversion and Inclusion Policy for further information.

Example Scenarios

- A Guest sends you a Facebook friend request → Decline and inform your line manager.
- A Guest offers you an expensive gift → Politely decline, explain the boundary, and record the incident.
- A former Guest invites you to a social event → Check with your line manager first.

You discover a Guest is a neighbour or acquaintance → Disclose immediately and agree a management plan.

Training

The Gatehouse provides annual training for all staff, volunteers, and students to ensure they are confident and competent in maintaining clear professional boundaries. This includes refresher training on safeguarding, confidentiality, and the practical application of boundary guidance in day-to-day work. Additional training may be offered where specific needs arise, or where staff or volunteers request further support in navigating boundary situations. Attendance at training is expected, and any additional learning needs should be discussed with a line manager to ensure appropriate provision and oversight.