

Mangement of Volunteers

Personal Boundaries and Confidentiality

What are boundaries and why do we need professional boundaries in volunteer roles?

- Boundaries set the parameters of what is and is not acceptable behaviour by staff and volunteers in the work place
- Boundaries help to protect and inform both workers, volunteers and service users by clarifying what types of behaviour will or will not be tolerated
- Boundaries give workers confidence as they know how to react to different situations
- Clear boundaries help to develop trusting relationships with service users who will know what to expect from workers and volunteers
- Boundaries help to develop professionalism by encouraging high standards of work and consistency between different workers and volunteers
- Boundaries should clarify (for workers, volunteers and service users) the difference between befriending someone in order to offer support and being their friend in a social sense
- Boundaries at work help workers manage stress by separating work and private lives

Do's and Don'ts

These are intended as a rough guide to the type of things workers and volunteers need to consider. In each case there are examples of why the activity crosses boundaries as well as possible exceptions where the activity may be permissible.

Do's

Challenge colleagues and other volunteers – remember to challenge the person's action rather than the person themselves (i.e. focus on the specific behaviour that caused the problem).

Do

Challenge other workers or volunteers who you feel are overstepping boundaries or being unprofessional. (although don't do this in front of other volunteers and staff)

Reasons – So that the unprofessional behaviour may stop. As a learning opportunity for the worker or volunteer and to protect service users from abuse.

Exceptions – If you feel uncomfortable challenging a colleague report it to a manager who can challenge for you if appropriate.

Do

Challenge volunteers if you feel they are being discriminatory or challenging to other volunteers

Reasons – So that the volunteer may learn and their discriminatory behaviour may stop. To set a good example to other volunteers and show that discrimination is unacceptable.

Respect for Colleagues

Do

Respect other workers and volunteers and ensure that the team is acting consistently.

Reasons – To support each other, not contradict one another, share work load and give a consistent impression to volunteers, so that all volunteers know what they can expect of all workers and so that unrealistic precedents are not set.

Socialising

Don't

Socialise with service users outside of work time.

Don't

Have sexual relations with staff, volunteers or other service users.

Reasons – Socialising with volunteers or staff blurs the private and professional roles. It may make maintaining confidentiality difficult. Other workers/volunteers may be resentful or suspect favouritism. In the case of service users, socialising or sexual contact is never acceptable. It can lead to allsorts of problems, including breakdown of professional boundaries and also carries with it the risk of allegations being made against you by the service user and can also put you at risk of exploitation.

Exceptions – Socialising with volunteers, staff and service users during work time is fine e.g. as part of the support worker role, provided it is clear that this is part of your working role.

Personal Information

Don't

Give out personal information about other staff, volunteers, or service users and be very careful about information you disclose about yourself. For example don't give out addresses, phone numbers, health information, social details etc.

Reasons – You may open up yourself or others to robbery, harassment or violence if you upset someone. Workers and volunteers can receive abusive phone calls if their telephone number is known. People may be embarrassed or very sensitive about personal information of any kind being known.

Drink/Drugs

Don't

Work under the influence of alcohol or non-prescribed drugs. Strong prescribed drugs can also be dangerous and impair judgement. Also volunteers should not work when their functioning is impaired due to ill-health.

Reasons – Your judgement, emotions and ability to cope with challenging situations will be affected. The organisation's insurance is invalid if staff and volunteers are intoxicated.

Participating in Illegal Behaviour

Don't

condone or participate in behaviour exhibited by volunteers which is either illegal, unwise from a safety point of view, or which is discriminating or oppressive to others.

Reasons – Workers should behave as responsible adults, and could be held accountable for any resulting actions e.g. accidents, harassment, arrests etc.

Gifts

Don't

Give/receive personal gifts to/from service users or staff.

Reasons – Giving/receiving gifts may give the impression of favouritism. Receiving gifts from service users may also imply favouritism and *may* raise the service user's expectations of the level of support you can provide – it blurs professional boundaries.

Exceptions – It may be appropriate to give/receive a small gift to/from the whole team in recognition of a particular event or piece of work.

Lending/Borrowing

Don't

Lend to or borrow from service users or other volunteers, especially money.

Reasons – Pressure for the return of a borrowed item or money could strain the relationship and affect the work of the organisation.

Buying/Selling

Don't

Buy anything from/sell anything to service users.

Reasons – Items you buy/sell could be stolen or illegal e.g. duty free tobacco. It is immoral to make money out of people you work with especially if they are on low income.

Confidentiality Guidelines

Confidential information is that which is regarded as 'personal'. It is information which is told to an individual, or a group of people, and is not meant for public or general knowledge. It is the duty of volunteers not to reveal to any other person, outside the specifically expressed person(s) within the organisation, any matter which becomes known to the individual via their involvement with the organisation. This includes information which may be traced back to the individual by identifying them or anyone else involved with them.

'*Personal Information*' is that which is defined by the individual, but should always include my status, name, address, sexual orientation, personal lifestyle and relationship and financial situation.

It should be accepted that it may be necessary to over-ride the confidentiality policy in the event of legal proceedings, child abuse or where a third party may be at risk of serious and immediate harm.

Here are some general guidelines which you could adapt and use within your organisation:

- Volunteers have a considerable amount of contact with service users and so will be aware of confidential information. These guidelines are not exclusive, but provide a checklist of some of the situations where confidentiality could be put at risk. Any breach of confidentiality will be dealt with under the disciplinary procedure.
- It is important for volunteers, where possible, to be clear about their limits with clients, so that they are not placed in a position where they are hearing information they would prefer not to hear, or feel that they are not able to keep within the boundaries of confidentiality.

- Information about another person, even if presented in a way to protect the individual's confidentiality, can be both misinterpreted and identifiable. Informal chatting with colleagues from other agencies or organisations can lead to confidentiality being broken, due to the fact that the client may be common to both parties and both parties are bound by confidentiality
- Often volunteers may feel that a close friend can be trusted and may be a form of support. It is a habit to be discouraged and volunteers should rather seek support from a paid member of staff who is responsible for them. Remember that no matter how close or concerned, friends do not have the right to confidential information about the organisation.
- It is likely that it will be the natural progression to discuss any event that takes place while volunteering with a partner. It must be remembered that your partner is the same as any other person in terms of confidentiality. If a volunteer is struggling with either of the above, they must seek the support of staff immediately.
- Relaxing in a social environment and drinking can lead to disclosure of information. Volunteers must be aware that they do not know who may be within earshot.
- If the organisation has to call you at work or at home, please ensure that no mention of names is made within the earshot of colleagues, family or others, and information written down is not in view.
- Volunteers should not leave notes of clients' information in view of any other person nor discuss clients on the phone within earshot of another.
- It is possible that people other than yourself may have the opportunity to see your personal records or work plans. All such notes should be destroyed on completion of duties or brought into the office for shredding.
- If you meet a client in the street, you may break their confidence by acknowledging them. Let that person make the decision to recognise you or not.
- Volunteers should never become involved in conversations with clients about other clients. Any information revealed to a volunteer about another client should be reported to the appropriate person within the organisation.
- When visiting, driving or picking up a client, volunteers may see and speak with relatives, friends or others associated with clients. Volunteers should not discuss the client with these people, when information is being offered.
- Volunteers should not offer personal information to clients about themselves or about colleagues or the agency. 'Personal confidences' cannot be guaranteed in this situation.
- Volunteers 'phoning clients from their own home should dial 141 first.
- Volunteers are bound by the terms of their contract on confidentiality on leaving the organisation. Failure to adhere to this is likely to result in Positive Help taking appropriate legal action.

See also Set3, InfoSheet 3.6, Volunteer Files and Data Protection.