



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES - PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

1. SCOPE

This document sets out The Springfield Project's policy and good practice guidelines on professional boundaries with service users, and personal relationships between staff members and volunteers. Where we use 'staff' or 'staff members' in this policy, we refer to paid employees and volunteers, unless otherwise stated.

It is recognised that staff must establish rapport with service users and provide support that is personal and based on a trusting, supportive relationship. Within this context staff members are responsible for ensuring that they establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries between themselves and service users.

It is recognised that the Springfield Project is a community project and that staff may live locally and may also attend St Christopher's Church.

Staff members may meet service users outside of the work setting on a regular basis, and they should feel confident to communicate freely with services users within prescribed guidelines.

These guidelines should be read in conjunction with the Conflicts of interest policy.

2. VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF WORKING WITH SERVICE USERS

This section sets out a professional context for working with services users by describing basic values and principles that govern professional practice.

These principles are:

- Boundaries define the limits of behaviour, which allow a caring professional and a service user to engage safely in a supportive caring relationship. These boundaries are based upon trust, respect and the appropriate use of power.
- The relationship between staff and service users is a supportive caring relationship that must focus solely upon meeting the needs of the service user. It is not established to build personal or social contacts for staff.

Moving the focus of interaction away from meeting service users' needs towards meeting the employee's own needs is an unacceptable abuse of power.

- On occasions a member of staff may develop an attachment towards a particular service user. While this may be natural, the staff member should ensure that this does not lead to a breach of professional boundaries. Staff should be encouraged to discuss these kind of difficulties with their manager or colleague as part of practice supervision.

3. BEFRIENDING

Staff within the Springfield Project may be required to 'befriend' a service user, in order to assist the service user to access services. Staff must never overstep professional boundaries and confuse befriending with friendship. All workers must be aware of the difference between:

- Befriending a service user – which is a professional relationship, made to meet service users' needs, and
- Becoming a service user's friend – which is a relationship that focuses on the needs of both people. A professional relationship focuses solely on the needs of the service user.

Befriending is an appropriate relationship for staff, and part of building the necessary trust to work with service users. Becoming a friend is inappropriate. Staff are engaged by the Springfield Project to work with service users as part of the contract of employment or a volunteering agreement and it is potentially an abuse of power to represent the relationship as a friendship.

4. COUNSELLING

Similarly, staff must be aware of the difference between being a counsellor and using counselling skills (such as active listening with a non-judgmental approach)-

that are appropriate for the delivery of care and support. Counselling is not an appropriate role for staff unless you have been employed specifically as a professional counsellor.

Where it is appropriate that a service user may be in need of counselling, they should be given advice and support on accessing other appropriate agencies.

5. PROVIDING ADVICE

Where service users approach staff for advice, that advice should be offered in a non-judgemental manner.

When staff offer advice to service users they should ensure that they provide sufficient information for service users to make an informed choice.

Staff should be aware of the areas in which they are not qualified to give advice and/or feel it is not appropriate for them to offer advice. In these instances you should inform the service user of this, making every effort to assist them in accessing appropriate and/or qualified advice.

6. INFLUENCE

Staff must be careful not to influence service users with their own beliefs and personal values.

Staff should also be aware of their potential to influence vulnerable and/or impressionable service users unintentionally.

Although morality, religion and politics are common areas of conversation and service users may wish to discuss their views with staff, staff should never impose their own views on others. Whilst the Springfield Project is a church-based organisation with a clear Christian ethos, it is an organisation that accepts and values the beliefs of those of other faiths, and those of no faith.

7. APPROACHABILITY

Staff should be seen as approachable, open to fair challenge and criticism, and available to engage in meaningful dialogue. They should not be seen as intimidating or inaccessible people. Service users must not be discouraged from accessing support within agreed boundaries or from making complaints.

8. RELATIONSHIPS AND CONTACT WITH SERVICE USERS WITHIN WORK:

Where members of staff know service users prior to entering the service, or come to know services users in another context, -

the staff member must inform their line manager. The staff member should not be given the role of the key worker. New members of staff starting work may find that they know existing service users. This should be brought to the attention of their line manager. The line manager will explore with the member of staff issues around confidentiality and risk assessment, and arrangements may be made to substitute an alternative staff member.

9. RELATIONSHIPS AND CONTACT WITH SERVICE USERS OUTSIDE OF WORK:

Staff must not give service users their personal contact details, for example postal address, telephone/mobile number, email address, etc. Staff must not communicate with service users on social networking sites, except if they are authorised administrators of The Springfield Project's social media accounts, and communicating strictly as The Springfield Project, not in a personal capacity.

Staff must not give service users the personal contact details of any colleague.

Staff who encounter service users out of hours should be pleasant and civil if approached by the service user, but should generally discourage prolonged social contact. Staff should not approach service users in any social setting if the contact is not instigated by the service user. Some service users may not want to be recognised or identified as a user of the service. Staff must endeavour not to arrange out-of-hours contact with service users. Any out-of-hours contact must be planned in advance with the staff member's line manager, with appropriate safety measures put in place.

Sexual relationships between staff and service users are prohibited, and will lead to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

10. RELATIONSHIPS AND CONTACT WITH FAMILY MEMBERS WITHIN WORK:

Where staff have family members who are employed or volunteer at the Project, the staff member must inform their line manager. The staff member should not be given the role of the line manager. The Project recognises that on occasion a staff member's family or friends' may volunteer at the Project.

There are no problems with this provided that professional boundaries are maintained by the staff member, the volunteer, and the Volunteering Manager. In many cases working on separate areas of the organisation or separate sites will be recommended. If the volunteer has any issues regarding their volunteering, they should raise this directly with the Volunteering Manager rather than via the member of staff. (If this is a complaint regarding the Volunteering Manager themselves then the volunteer can complain to another member of volunteering staff or to the Volunteering Manager's line manager).

Staff must respect the structures that are in place to manage volunteers and failure to do so may lead to the volunteer being asked to stop their work with the Project.

11. CONFIDENTIALITY

Staff should be mindful at all times of the Project's confidentiality policy. It is never appropriate to discuss other service users or members of staff with service users. Professional discussions about service users between staff within the organisation must be approached with respect and should seek to avoid judgemental comments or content which might be construed as 'gossip'.

12. DISCLOSURE OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

Staff should avoid speaking about their own experiences, unless this is relevant and helpful to the interaction with the service user.

Where staff have experienced challenges being faced by services users, it is important to remember that no two experiences are the same, and it is not always helpful to draw parallels. Where mentioning your past experience may be helpful the staff member must always remember that their role is to support the service user, and they must not use this to promote any particular solution to service users.

The staff member must only disclose personal information if doing so does not cause them to have any emotional reaction, and they are able to use their information in a detached, professional manner.

Where the content of work with service users is upsetting for staff, due to similarities with their own experiences, or parallels in their own lives, they should discuss this with their line manager. Staff will be supported to access advice and counselling as appropriate.

13. MANAGING BOUNDARY ISSUES

Staff may unwittingly be put in a position where their relationship with service users is compromised, or be drawn into conversations or situations where their boundaries are being stretched or crossed. In some situations the fine line between good and bad practice may not always be obvious or clear.

A staff member should seek the guidance of their line manager if they are unsure about the nature of a relationship developing with a service user, or if they need advice on how they intend to deal with a situation.

Similarly if the immediate line manager requires advice they must consult their line manager.

In situations where it has not been possible to access support in this way, any action which has been taken must be discussed with the line manager as soon as is possible.

Other people in your team, particularly those who are likely to work with the service user must also be aware of where a boundary has been blurred or crossed. This is for two reasons:

- so they can maintain consistent practice with that service user (and a consistent explanation with other service users); and
- to ensure that the action taken does not look like a ‘guilty secret’.

14. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF MEMBERS

The Springfield Project recognises that staff members who work together may form personal friendships and, in some cases, close personal relationships. The Springfield Project does not, as a general rule, wish to interfere with such personal friendships and relationships.

However, it must also ensure that staff behave in an appropriate, professional and responsible manner at work and that they continue to fulfil their job duties both diligently and effectively. These rules are therefore aimed at striking a balance between the right to a private life and the Project's right to protect its business interests. Staff must not allow personal relationships with colleagues to influence their conduct at work. Staff members must ensure that personal relationships do not affect other team members, and that their behaviour and attitudes do not lead other staff members to feel excluded.

The formation of cliques within the workplace can cause colleagues to feel uncomfortable and excluded. Any behaviour that creates this impression must be avoided.

At times staff members may wish to seek advice and support from a colleague in respect to a personal issue. This should be avoided if there is a possibility that the information discussed may compromise the professional relationship or either party's ability to fulfil their role and duties. Such discussions should not take place on Project premises or within work time without the approval of a line manager.

Staff members requiring support in respect of a personal matter should seek support from their line manager in the first instance. Staff members will be signposted to appropriate services.

If you embark on an intimate relationship with a colleague, you should declare this to your line manager as soon as reasonably practicable.

Intimate behaviour during normal working hours or on Project or client premises is prohibited. This includes, but is not limited to, holding hands, other close physical contact, discussions of a sexual nature or kissing.

If you are a manager and you embark on a relationship with a more junior member of staff, you should declare this to a director as soon as reasonably practicable. This is particularly important if you are the line manager of the employee because of the risk of the junior employee being afforded more favourable treatment, or less favourable treatment if the relationship subsequently breaks down. In order to avoid a situation where you have managerial authority over a junior member of staff with whom you are having a relationship, the Project reserves the right to elect to transfer one or both of you to a job in another-

department, either on a temporary basis or permanently. The Project will first consult with both of you to try and reach an amicable agreement on transfer.

If you begin a relationship with a supplier or contractor and your relationship allows the potential for you to abuse your level of authority, you must declare the relationship to your line manager as soon as reasonably practicable. In these circumstances, the Project reserves the right to elect to transfer you to a job in another department where you will not be able to exert undue influence over the other party, either on a temporary basis or permanently.

The Project will first consult with you to try and reach an amicable agreement on transfer.

If a personal relationship (or the breakdown of a personal relationship) starts to affect your performance or conduct at work, then your line manager will speak to you with a view to your previous level of performance or conduct being restored. However, if your performance or conduct fails to improve or it reverts to the problem level, the matter will become a disciplinary one and will be dealt with under the Project's disciplinary procedure.

If you are having or have had a personal relationship and you are found to have afforded either more or less favourable treatment to the other member of staff because of this relationship or you have exercised undue influence over a client, customer, supplier or contractor, this is a disciplinary matter and will be dealt with under the Project's disciplinary procedure.

15. STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Boundary issues should be discussed within supervision and within each team on a regular basis,

and on occasions specific team training or facilitated discussion may be appropriate.

- Line managers will be responsible for general monitoring of these guidelines.
- Transgressions will be reviewed with individual staff members, but in some cases it may be appropriate to record examples for discussion as part of staff training or discussion at team meetings.
- Significant and/or repeated breaches of this policy will lead to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

Policy review July 2023

Responsibility	COO
Procedure	In partnership with the senior leadership team.
Timing	Next review July 2026