

Boundaries and Relationships Policy

Whilst staff and volunteers are expected to be friendly to those we support, their relationship with service users should remain a professional one, and all interactions between service users and workers must be viewed and carried out in terms of a professional relationship.

Inn Churches recognises that workers need to establish a trusting relationship with service users, but that workers are also responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between themselves and service users.

Workers with Inn Churches hold implicit power over service users, and must not have any relationship with a service user involving contact outside of their work or volunteering, take wider responsibility for a service user (eg. acting as a guarantor), or use service users as a form of support for themselves.

Staff members and volunteers should not conduct private correspondence with service users, arrange to meet them, or exchange contact details of any form with them (including post or email addresses, phone numbers or social media). This is essential for the safety of workers and service users, and the continued success of Inn Churches.

If you are interested in volunteering in a befriending capacity, Inn Churches does have opportunities for this, and with the right checks and safeguards it can be very successful, but Inn Churches' activities are not the place to develop these sorts of relationships. Please contact Inn Churches for information about befriending opportunities and the training involved.

Scope and definitions

In this policy, **service users** is used to refer to those that the charity supports through its activities.

Workers is taken to include paid staff, contractors, anybody volunteering with Inn Churches or anybody else acting on behalf of Inn Churches.

Manager is taken to mean the worker's line manager, team leader or other person that they report to and are accountable to, or if they are unavailable or they are not the appropriate person for some reason, their manager's manager, or ultimately the charity's CEO or Chair of Trustees.

This policy applies to all workers, who are responsible for adhering to and upholding the policy, both in their own relationships and by reporting any concerns about others to their manager.

This policy uses 'boundary' to mean the line between a professional and a personal relationship. Crossing this boundary changes the relationship from being objective to subjective.

The policy also refers to the concept of a 'power imbalance', which is often an implicit feature in a worker/service user relationship: service users are often vulnerable and may be in crisis, confused, needy or mentally unwell, even if this may not be apparent. Workers are in a position of power because they have access to (and control of) resources and personal information about service users which are not available to them in their ordinary role as a citizen.

Relationships between workers and service users

The only appropriate relationship between a service user and worker is a professional one that focuses upon the assessed, legitimate needs of the service user. It is therefore the responsibility of the worker to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. Workers should be aware of the potential imbalance of power and maintain boundaries to protect themselves and service users. This means being authentic and empathetic, whilst neither sharing personal information inappropriately nor encouraging belief in a special, exclusive or personal relationship.

Helping and supporting others can be both physically and emotionally demanding and draining. Appropriate boundaries are therefore required to allow a service user and worker to engage safely in a professional caring relationship. Workers should not use service users as a form of support, disclosing their own problems or personal information.

All professional relationships contain the potential for conflicts of interest. Workers may develop strong feelings for a service user. These feelings in themselves are neither abnormal nor wrong but will compromise the professional relationship if they are acted upon improperly. If workers feel that they are developing an attraction to, or an overly familiar relationship with, a service user they must disclose such feelings at the earliest stage possible to their manager. If such feelings are disclosed, measures will need to be put in place to recognise the situation and deal with it appropriately, to avoid unbalancing the working relationship and causing harm.

Situations may arise where the relationship between a worker and a service user is open to being misconstrued. Workers finding themselves in difficult situations which may be misconstrued should report it to their manager as soon as they are aware of it. The situation will be recorded and advice given to the worker (or sought from the Project Coordinator / CEO or Chair of Trustees).

Workers must not form intimate personal or sexual relationships with service users. Workers should not behave in a way which may call into question their professional conduct or endanger the confidence service users and the public place in Inn Churches to deliver care.

Workers must not have contact with service users outside of the context they are working with them, or conduct private correspondence with them. Workers should not give or exchange contact information or arrange to meet service users outside of the work or volunteering context.

Where a worker has a pre-existing relationship of any kind with a service user, they must inform their manager as soon as possible. Such instances will be handled sensitively, and the worker will be given the opportunity to discuss potential boundary conflicts and how to manage them.

Reporting potential breaches or concerns

If a worker becomes aware of a risk that they could, or have, developed a non-professional relationship with a service user, they must immediately seek advice from their manager (who may seek further advice from their manager, the Project Coordinator / CEO, or the Chair of Trustees).

If a worker becomes aware of the possibility of an inappropriate relationship between another worker and a service user, they should raise their concern through the same channels.

Once a report is made, investigation and action will be taken to prevent further development of a non-professional relationship. This can include support, advice, changes in working practice, disciplinary, safeguarding or other action as appropriate.

Examples of inappropriate actions or relationship

- Sexual or other physical contact between workers and service users
- Personal relationships between workers and service users
- Friendships conducted by text message, email, social networking sites or the internet
- Workers divulging personal details about themselves or other workers to service users
- Workers giving or accepting individual gifts or favours (see Expenses, Gifts & Gratuities policy)
- Workers and service users entering into any sort of financial arrangement
- Banter, innuendo, play-fighting or profanities
- Anything between a worker and service user which the worker conceals from other workers.

Relationships between former workers and guests

Relationships between current workers and former service users, former workers and current service users or former workers and former service users can still retain elements of the risks outlined above and care should be taken. In particular, relationships between former workers or service users are not appropriate when the service user was suffering from mental health issues when they were using the service.

Sexual relationships between a worker and a former service user will often be inappropriate, regardless of how long ago the professional relationship ended, because of the imbalance of power issues.

A worker who develops a personal or sexual relationship with a former service user should seek guidance from their manager as soon as possible, to minimise the risk of any subsequent allegations, or concerns about their professional integrity or Inn Churches' integrity. The worker should seriously consider the possible future harm which may be caused and the potential impact on their reputation and that of Inn Churches.

Relationships between workers

Because of the nature of the Inn Churches work, there will often be pre-existing personal relationships between workers.

Workers with a close personal relationship should ensure that the relationship is known to their manager. They should be aware of their behaviour towards each other in the work environment, recognising that overt displays of affection for example could be difficult for service users or other workers.

For safeguarding purposes, workers who are married or partnered only count as a single individual for safeguarding purposes.

Breaches of this policy

Appropriate action will be taken against any worker who contravenes this policy.

In serious cases this could be seen as gross misconduct which may be subject to disciplinary action and may result in dismissal or the volunteer being asked to leave the project. Where applicable a referral may also be made for investigation under safeguarding procedures.