



**The Happy Mums Foundation CIC**

**Professional Boundaries  
Policy and Guidance**

## **Introduction**

This document should be read in conjunction with The Happy Mums Foundation's Code of Conduct, and Safeguarding Policy and Guidance.

This document sets out The Happy Mums Foundation's policy principles and guidance on professional boundaries with service users.

We use the term 'service users' in this document in relation to the mums, mums-to-be and people that identify as mums, that attend our support groups.

It is recognised that staff must establish rapport with service users and provide support that optimises the potential for service users to meet their basic human needs. However, staff are responsible for ensuring that establish and maintain appropriate professional boundaries between themselves and service users.

There is no single definition of what constitutes professional boundaries. Our intention is to achieve a shared understanding of acceptable and unacceptable practice, enabling us to apply clear and consistent standards across The Happy Mums Foundation's services.

As a peer-led organisation that see's service users become volunteers and volunteers become staff, we recognise that relationships will have developed over time. This document should not be seen as a directive to end all existing friendships with mums who may also be service users. This document is designed as a guide to aid in safeguarding all parties around the professional elements of those interactions.

This guidance applies to all contact with service users and should be incorporated into day-to-day practices.

## **STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES AND AUTHORITIES**

The Managing Director has overall responsibility for ensuring that these guidelines are followed.

Line managers have the specific role of monitoring day to day team and individual practice and have a responsibility to challenge and address staff when standards are not being maintained.

All staff are individually responsible for applying and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries in their day-to-day work and for raising any associated issues or training needs with their line manager.

### **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 staff 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 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 care 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 as part of supervision.

### **Befriending**

Staff must never overstep professional boundaries and confuse befriending with friendship. All staff 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.
- 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 employed by The Happy Mums Foundation to work with service users as part of the contract of employment and it is potentially an abuse of power to represent the relationship as a friendship.

### **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 to counsel, and your job description outlines the areas of work for you to cover as a professional counsellor. The Happy Mums Foundation does not currently provide any professional counselling services.

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.

### **Providing advice**

In general, advice should normally only be offered to service users when they request it, unless there are good reasons to be more directive. Where you do offer more directive advice, for example in a situation where there is a potential for physical harm or danger, you should aim to do this in a non-judgemental manner.

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

You should be aware of the areas in which you are not qualified to give advice and/or feel it is not appropriate for you 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.

### **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.

Although morality, religion and politics are common areas of conversation and service users may wish to discuss their views with staff, staff should never promote or impose their own views.

### **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.

## **Privacy**

Staff must respect service users' rights to privacy, and be sensitive and responsive to any different personal and cultural needs for privacy that may arise.

## **Inappropriate Personal Disclosure**

Staff should not divulge any personal information about themselves or other staff members unless in the context of lived experience during support group facilitation – where the group agreement stipulates everything is confidential.

## **Concealing Information from Colleagues about Service Users**

Confidentiality must be retained for all information shared in groups unless someone is at risk of harm. However it is unacceptable to conceal information from colleagues about service users that may lead to misunderstandings or potential harm.

This might include:

- personal information in line with data collected at registration
- reports of violent or critical incident/issues
- child protection issues
- not completing full records of service user interactions including consents

## **Touch – Physical Contact**

The Happy Mums Foundation staff should approach touching with great care and caution. Where touching does occur it must take place within the specific local work instructions or professional boundaries within the service.

Some service users may misinterpret physical contact as affection outside the professional relationship. Service users may also see physical contact as expressions of favouritism, for example where a staff member hugs one service user and not another. All staff should therefore be aware that physical contact risks being misunderstood and it may result in staff being vulnerable to allegations of inappropriate professional behaviour.

Consent should always be sought before any physical contact, such as hugging an upset group member or picking up a child.

In all service contexts where touching occurs it must only take place within the context of a professional relationship and with the service user's agreement.

## **GUIDANCE ON IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Financial relationships**

Staff must not enter into any financial relationships with service users including but not limited to:

- Staff must not enter into any financial transactions with service users including buying, selling, exchanging or bartering goods or services.
- Staff must not lend their personal money or possessions to service users.
- Staff must not borrow money or possessions from service users.
- Staff should not give or accept gifts from service users.
- Staff should not accept monetary charitable donations to the service without the prior agreement of line managers.
- Staff should not normally handle money on behalf of service users except in clearly defined local work instructions.
- Staff should not agree to become trustees, beneficiaries or executors in relation to the wills of service users.

## **Relationships and contact with service users within work**

Where members of staff know service users prior to entering the service, the staff member must inform their line manager. Where possible, if an existing relationship has been discussed and it is felt there may be a risk to a support group dynamic, we will try to limit the working time between that particular service user and staff member. 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 as soon as discovered. The line manager will explore with the member of staff issues around confidentiality and risk assessment.

## **Relationships and contact with service users outside of work**

This includes:

- Staff should not allow service users to visit/reside their homes.
- Staff must not encourage service users to develop relationships with the staff member's relatives or friends.
- Staff must not give service users their personal contact details, for example postal address, telephone number, fax number, email address, etc.
- 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 especially where the service user's behaviour indicates that they do not want to be recognised or indeed identified as a user of the service.
- Staff must endeavour not to arrange out of hours contact with service users.

## **Discussing others**

Confidentiality is a key element of safety within Happy Mums

- 'Gossip' or hearsay should not feature as an aspect of service culture and should be actively discouraged among staff, volunteers, and service users.
- Staff must never share personal details about other staff with service users.
- Staff must never discuss other staff members with service users except on issues relating to further signposting.
- Staff must never discuss service users with other service users and other third parties.
- Where any of the above does occur the incident must be brought to the attention of the relevant line manager as soon as possible.

## **Other relationship issues**

Other examples include:

- Staff must not hold or administer medication unless specifically authorised and trained to do so.
- Staff should avoid being left alone with children.
- Staff should avoid becoming a "taxi service" for a service user.

The above guidelines are not exhaustive, and staff should be vigilant and particularly careful to avoid any opportunity for actual or perceived exploitation of a professional relationship and where identified should be risk assessed.

## **MANAGING BOUNDARY ISSUES**

Staff may unwittingly be put in a position where their relationship with service users is compromised, or to 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.

Version: 1.1

Date approved by Board: July 2024

Date of next review: July 2026

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'.

Some written record of a broken or blurred boundary must be kept; again to ensure openness and consistency. This record will use initials only. Instances may be used as examples in future training and / or policy making only if confidentiality can be maintained.

Boundary issues should be discussed with the line manager and within each team on a regular basis, and on occasions specific team training or facilitated discussion may be appropriate.

There are some events and arrangements planned with service users that are highly valued by them but may present potential boundary issues. In these instances there may at times be a need to exercise flexibility and discretion in the interpretation of this policy. Such instances where there are clear potential benefits to service users should be brought to the attention of the manager. The situation will then be 'risk assessed', any necessary safeguards agreed with the line manager and a record kept.

This approach should ensure that transparency is maintained in agreeing variations and that positive risk taking is managed.

Role based risk assessments should be updated by Line Managers to address potential risks to service users.

## **MONITORING AND REVIEW**

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.