

Maintaining Professional Boundaries Policy and Guidelines

1. Background

Visyon is a charity that offers support to those who are particularly vulnerable, due to their age and emotional wellbeing. The Visyon trustees are responsible for ensuring that those benefiting from, or working with, the charity are not harmed in any way through contact with it. They have a legal duty to act prudently and this means that they must take all reasonable steps within their power to ensure that this does not happen. This policy forms part of this duty.

2. Introduction

At Visyon, we believe a culture of respect, support and empowerment contributes to a healthy and happy working environment. Please see Visyon Values statement. By following the guidelines set out in this document, we intend to minimise risk of harm, confusion and mixed messages within our professional relationships. Professional boundaries are important because they define the limits and responsibilities of the people with whom you interact in and out of the workplace. These boundaries exist to protect all those who come into contact with Visyon.

It is essential to address these issues in order:

- to protect vulnerable clients from relationships with Visyon staff, which may have exploitative or damaging aspects, or from situations where the worker may be subject to a conflict of interests, with implications for their relationship with the service user.
- to protect the privacy and well-being of workers, be they paid members of staff or volunteers, by giving them clear guidance regarding the setting and maintaining of role boundaries.

Boundaries ensure that there are guidelines and a framework under which all Visyon workers can operate. The nature of our work means that individuals may well be faced with sensitive issues and be concerned about the best way to react. Whilst this document cannot be exhaustive it aims to raise awareness of the nature of professional boundaries and encourages workers to debate these matters both in team meetings and with their line manager

3. Scope

This policy extends to all Visyon workers including staff, volunteers, sessional workers and trustees.

4. Definitions

Integrity: “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles”. All Visyon staff are expected to act with integrity.

Appropriate Behaviour: This means behaving in a manner that is suitable for working with the public, respecting the other members of staff, and service users and treating them as you would wish to be treated. Visyon staff must take responsibility for their

actions, show mutual respect, be professional, fair, and equitable, and be conscious of the potential vulnerabilities of those around them.

Clients/Service Users: These two terms are used interchangeably in this document to refer to the people who use one or more of the services that Visyon offers.

5. Potential Boundary Issues

- **Personal relationships in the workplace**

In situations where a personal friendship exists or develops, with a service user, the individual should make his/her line manager aware of this fact. Consideration should be given as to whether any conflicts of interest are likely to arise and how these may be best dealt with.

It is recognised that friendships and/or relationships will develop between colleagues, but an awareness and sensitivity of the impact this can have on others should be maintained. It is important that any inter-workplace relationships/ friendships remain professional in the workplace, and where necessary are declared to relevant line managers.

- **Social networking, IT and texting**

Facebook and Twitter are public arenas. An awareness of this is necessary when engaging with these mediums. Visyon recommends that privacy settings should be set to friends only, and caution exercised with shared material. It is not appropriate for a young service user to become a 'friend' on an individual's Facebook.

Personal home or mobile phone numbers should not be given out to clients. Texting has become a common form of communication, Visyon staff and workers need to make sure that texts are factual and concise and used only for the purpose of information giving in a professional context. Visyon works with children and young people who are deemed as vulnerable, therefore we need to be alert and cautious to the type of language we use so as to not cause confusion or give mixed messages.

- **Financial Transactions**

We actively discourage financial transactions between clients and the workers engaged in supportive roles with them. Examples of such transactions might be the buying or selling of goods or the lending or borrowing of money.

- **Divulging Personal Information**

Care should be taken by workers over how much personal information they divulge to clients and, in particular, should not disclose their own home addresses and private telephone numbers.

- **Gifts, Favours and Hospitality**

A service user may at times wish to give a gift, or offer a favour or hospitality to a worker to express appreciation for help given and it could be insensitive of the

worker to refuse a token offering of this kind. However, it is not appropriate for a worker to accept any gift, favour or hospitality which has a significant monetary value, or is open to misinterpretation. A worker should always make his/her manager aware of any gift, favour or hospitality, however small.

- **Friendly but not Friends**

Visyon staff must be friendly to service users but must be clear that the role is not one of friend.

- **Physical Contact**

Any such contact, be it a touch of the hand, or a hug, should be for the benefit of the client, not the worker and should be led by the client's needs. Where such contact is initiated by the client, the worker should reciprocate in a manner which is appropriate to the situation. However, care needs to be taken that there is no misinterpretation by the client. Care also needs to be taken that there is no perceived preferential treatment. A staff member needs to ensure that they gain control in situations where the client initiates physical contact, and put strategies in place to ensure that the contact remains professional at all times.

- **Recognition of Workers' Own Limitations**

It is important that all workers, be they paid employees or volunteers, recognise the limitations of their own skills, knowledge and experience and do not go beyond these limitations in their work with clients. It is also important that workers have some thought for their own health and well-being and acknowledge and respect their own limits in coping with stress.

- **Encountering clients outside of work**

It is possible that you will encounter clients outside of the workplace in a social setting. It is important to behave and respond in a way that is appropriate, and responsible, especially if you have been perceived by a young person as a positive role model. Visyon supports a response from a Visyon worker that encourages a healthy professional boundary, for instance, "This is my day off today, but I am back in the office on Monday when we can catch up then".

- **Dual relationships**

It is possible that a Visyon worker could have more than one role with a young person e.g. a youth worker and a mentor. In this instance the maintaining of both relationships will require the Visyon worker to be clear and consistent in relation to professional boundaries. A relationship developed within Visyon does not automatically indicate a relationship outside of Visyon.

- **Accusations of preferential treatment**

Workers must always be aware that their actions may be open to unintended interpretations by service users. It is particularly important that no behaviour leads one person to believe that another is being given preferential treatment. Please refer to Equality and Diversity Policy for further guidance.

- **Clients or their parents expressing inappropriate views, endorsing illegality or challenging the views or actions of workers**

Visyon workers must not condone offensive behaviour or views expressed by service users, particularly when they may contravene our Equality and Diversity Policy.

- **Working hours**

Visyon supports its staff and workers in maintaining healthy boundaries in relation to working hours. It is appropriate to let clients' and other professionals know when you are off duty, and that contact is only possible during your contracted working hours.

- **Conflicts of Interest**

Because Visyon wishes to pursue commercial activity, and acknowledges that Visyon workers may also want to pursue their own commercial activity, it is important that any conflict of interest is declared to the CEO, to ensure responsible and mature management of the situation, and to protect Visyon's interests. Please see Policy and Guidelines for Staff with Additional Employment, Self Employment or Business Ventures.

6. Level of Awareness

Workers need to recognise that challenges to professional boundaries can occur in many ways and therefore it is important for any matter giving concern to be discussed on a regular basis in management supervision and team meetings. Workers are also encouraged to take advantage of training sessions offered on this subject.