

## Volunteering with Safety

### Exercise: Professional boundaries

We spoke in the training about the idea of professionalism – that although we were volunteers, if we are to protect ourselves and others we need to maintain standards of behaviour, as if our volunteering was a professional role we had. This means having a set of boundaries, lines which we do not cross. Such boundaries will include:

**Client focus:** the needs of the client should be at the heart of any decisions about them.

**Self-disclosure:** do not disclose more than minimum information about your personal life.

**Dual relationships:** you can only have one relationship with any client – and it is your role as a volunteer.

**Work within your competence:** know when to share information, involve others or ask advice.

**Looking after yourself:** you need to be fit for work. This includes managing your stress and emotions at work and how you behave outside.

Below are a number of situations which you might come across as part of your volunteering role. For each of them, take a few minutes to imagine yourself in that situation and think about what you would do, bearing in mind the boundaries we've just listed. We give some best practice guidance on the following pages.

#### What should you do if a client:

Gives you a gift?

Asks you to keep a secret?

Asks to borrow money from you?

Asks you to teach them something they know you do as a hobby or as self-employment outside of your volunteer role?

Constantly quizzes you about your personal life?

Starts to talk about their suicidal thoughts or experience of being abused?

Asks you to pick up something they have bought and offers you money for petrol?

## Answers

**If a client gives you a gift** it is best to gently and politely refuse it. This can be very difficult for us to do, as it can feel like we're rejecting a kindness. Particularly when we have built friendly relationships with clients, we can worry that refusing a gift is a form of insult.

However, gifts change the relationship between client and volunteer shifting it from one in which the volunteer is providing a service to one where mutual obligations exist. It can make it harder for the volunteer to remain in control of the relationship and refuse demands on them in future – we can feel beholden to our client, that since they did something nice for us we owe them something more than our role demands.

If a client wants to show us gratitude, we can find other ways for them to do it – such as through making a donation to charity.

**If a client asks us to keep a secret**, we can't accept. There are all sorts of things that we might be told which we need to report – such as allegations of abuse or admissions of illegal activity. Without knowing what the secret is in advance, we can't commit to confidentiality.

What we can offer is compassionate listening, bounded by our duty to act in the client's best interests. This means telling the client up front that we'll share anything they tell us which makes us believe they or someone else is in danger of harm or involved in anything illegal. This is particularly the case with children and vulnerable adults. If they still wish to tell us the secret they can. If they don't, we may want to discuss this with our organisation's safeguarding lead.

**If a client asks us to lend them money**, we should refuse. A client who owes us something may feel unable to come to us for the support they need that we would normally provide as a volunteer, because they are embarrassed by an inability to pay back or through a fear we'll demand money from them they don't have.

If a client comes to us with a request for money we should try to put them in touch with people who can help them access support – such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.

**If a client asks us to teach them something they know you do as a hobby or as self-employment outside of your volunteer role**, we should decline. We don't want to get ourselves into the situation where we

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have two relationships with a client – we should be friendly, but our clients are not our friends but people we are serving. When we blur that line it can get in the way of us giving them the help they need – we may end up resenting them for the demands they make on our time, we may displace our volunteering with other activities, we may end up doing things we're not comfortable doing because we've set a precedent of going beyond our volunteering role.

What we are in a position to do is to help our clients access the support they need from other people – do we know any other volunteering groups who could offer the support our client is looking for from us? We may need to escalate this question to someone more senior within our organisation who can use our links with others, such as the Local Authority or Safeguarding Partnership.

**If someone is constantly quizzing us about our personal life,** we should be politely mysterious. Again, our clients are generally not our friends and they are not there to provide us with emotional support. We are also not there to feed their curiosity. Private information can be used as a hold over us, to make us feel guilty or vulnerable. In some circumstances it can make it difficult to do our roles because we feel hypocritical or unreasonable.

This can be difficult, particularly if our role involves befriending – we may want to give information about ourselves as a way of forming that relationship. If this is likely to be the case, we should be clear in advance how much of ourselves we want to give – do we want clients to know where we live, how to find us outside of volunteering-hours, details of our family or relationship status? We probably don't, so what aspects of our life would we be comfortable sharing?

**If someone starts to talk about their suicidal thoughts or experience of being abused,** we must report it to our safeguarding lead, and we must tell the client that we will do this. This is one of those situations we've already talked about where we can't keep a secret – even if the client wants us to, doing so would cause them harm. We can't leave clients in a dangerous situation. Remember too though that we are not professionals and so we are not able to provide support ourselves – we could do more harm than good. Concerns should be escalated to those who can give support, which in these cases would be the Crisis Mental Health team and the Local Safeguarding Partnership. At the same time, we should point the clients in the direction of help they can get directly, such as the NHS, the Samaritans and the resources we developed in the 'Building a contacts list' exercise.



**If a client asks us to pick up something they have bought and offers you money for petrol,** we should gently refuse. Receiving money is much like receiving a gift – it changes our relationship from one where we're in control of the service we are delivering to one where we have an obligation to our client. As in the case of teaching that we mentioned earlier, it blurs the lines of our role placing more demands on us than we're trained to do. Crossing those lines once makes it harder to stick to them in the future, and we can quickly find ourselves doing things we're not comfortable doing or feeling guilty for refusing to do things. If we are to be at our best volunteering, we need to stick to our volunteering.