

Professional Boundaries Policy

1. Purpose

Inala Community House (ICH) is committed to ensuring safe, professional and high-quality services are provided to service users. To achieve this, all workers must be responsible in establishing and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with service users whilst also being able to build a strong rapport and provide respectful and impartial service delivery.

Professional boundaries are an essential aspect of the worker-service user relationship. These boundaries ensure equality for service users and minimise the risk of harm and dependency. Inadequate professional boundaries can result in conflicts of interest, favouritism, questions regarding professional judgement and can also negatively affect workers should they become personally affected by service user issues. Strong professional boundaries are essential to protect the reputation of the Service and of ICH.

This policy seeks to provide guidance regarding clear and consistent standards of professional practice. It aims to create a shared understanding of what constitutes professional relationships.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all employees, Board members, volunteers, students, trainees and contractors. For the purposes of this policy, these persons shall be referred to as workers.

3. Definitions

Professional Boundary: a term used to describe the difference between personal and professional relationships. It can be used to describe a range of measures which are enacted to establish and maintain the boundary between personal and professional relationships.

Personal Relationship: for example, a friendship where the needs and preferences of two parties are both considered.

Professional Relationship: a relationship where there is an acknowledged inequality between a worker and a service user and where appropriate boundaries are established to define the difference between a personal relationship and a professional relationship. In a professional relationship the needs and preferences of the service user are considered (it is not the service user who anticipates the needs and preferences of the worker).

Service User: any person who receives services (either directly or indirectly) provided by the organisation

4. Policy

ICH recognises the following principles within this policy:

- Professional boundaries protect both workers and service users
- Service users' rights, needs and preferences should be respected and upheld
- There is an inherent inequality in the relationship between a worker and a service user
- A personal relationship with a service user results in a conflict of interest
- Rapport building and respectful service delivery are essential components in achieving positive outcomes for service users

All workers have a responsibility for establishing and maintaining professional boundaries. This must occur throughout the service user engagement process. By establishing and maintaining these boundaries, workers must:

- Uphold safe, professional and high-quality service delivery
- Protect vulnerable service users
- Mitigate the risk of:
 - Misunderstandings regarding the nature of the relationship (e.g. confusion about friendships or other personal relationships)
 - Allegations of inappropriate behaviour
- Maintain their own safety and wellbeing

4.1 Service User Rights

All service users have the right to receive a service which is professional, confidential, impartial and safe. This means that service users should:

- Receive appropriate and equitable support, services and information which is within the scope of the service being delivered
- Expect professional, non-judgemental and impartial service delivery
- Not experience detriment or harm resulting from a lack of professional boundaries
- Have their confidential information protected
- Be informed of and supported to provide feedback or make a complaint

These rights are upheld where professional boundaries are established and maintained.

4.2 Professional Boundaries

Professional boundaries need to exist in the relationship between workers and service users as they protect both the worker and the service user.

Building a rapport with service users is essential to provide safe and supportive services. Services are focused on meeting the needs of and achieving quality outcomes for the service user. In order to do this, a level of trust needs to be established.

Professional boundaries for service users mean that they can be open and honest about their circumstances without fear of judgement. This is critical in ensuring the spaces we provide are safe and supportive.

For workers, it means protecting themselves from becoming too involved in service user's lives. Where professional boundaries are not upheld it can:

- Change the nature of the relationship from being professional and supportive to one of wanting to 'rescue' or be their friend
- Result in expectations being placed on the service user to do something in a way that makes a worker feel better

A potential professional boundaries issue may arise in situations where the service user:

- Offers inappropriate gifts to the worker (where it exceeds what would be reasonable for that professional relationship)
- Invites a worker to social occasions
- Perceives the worker as a friend
- Overshares their information beyond what is relevant to the services provided
- Asks a worker to take a role in their lives beyond what is within the scope of the services (e.g. next of kin, power of attorney, etc.)
- Uses physical contact inappropriately with the worker

Workers must be careful to hold professional boundaries by:

- Clearly outlining the nature of the relationship by defining:
 - What supports can be provided and the limitations of what services can offer
 - Service user rights and responsibilities
- Providing appropriate information, advice and support within the scope of services being delivered
- Avoiding:
 - Influencing service users with personal beliefs and values
 - Oversharing their own private information or circumstances
 - Any relationships with service users outside of work (including for a reasonable time after they have ceased receiving services from ICH)
 - Any personal gain (e.g. buying or selling goods from service users or any other financial transaction, lending or borrowing personal possessions from service users). In limited circumstances, this may be acceptable within the scope of services being delivered (e.g. purchasing an item made by a service user at a craft stall at an event)
- Ensuring that any physical contact is respectful and appropriate to the services being delivered
- Upholding confidentiality and privacy of other people (including other service users and workers)

4.3 Boundary Issues

Professional boundaries are broad in nature and are not always obvious. Workers can sometimes unknowingly be placed in a position where their professional relationship is compromised.

In these situations, advice should be sought from the Manager or Team Leader as soon as possible. Where this is not possible, any action or inaction should be discussed as soon as possible after the event.

Where a boundary has been crossed within a service, the issues should be raised with the worker/s involved. It may also be appropriate to address the issue with the relevant team in order to ensure consistent standards are maintained and communicated to service users.

4.4 Responsibilities

All workers must recognise that there is an inherent inequality in the relationship with service users. This inequality arises from the difference in power between each party. It is therefore critical that professional relationships are maintained at all times and that this power is not misused.

Workers must:

- Act in a manner which upholds the professional relationship with service users (in accordance with the ICH *Code of Conduct*)
- Seek advice from Managers or Team Leaders if unsure about actions or inactions which may constitute a potential breakdown of professional boundaries
- Report any incidents which present a risk of breaching professional boundaries
- Immediately notify the Manager or Team Leader if they have personal knowledge or a relationship with a service user (in accordance with the ICH *Conflict of Interest Policy*)
- Sensitively define personal versus professional relationships with service users in a way which maintains and upholds a professional and respectful relationship.

All workers will be supported to establish, maintain and monitor professional boundaries. Managers and/or Team Leaders will ensure that all workers are aware of this topic and will be available to provide guidance regarding professional boundaries. Managers and/or Team Leaders will take appropriate steps to support workers such as:

- Providing training and guidance
- Discussing in supervision
- Taking appropriate steps to ensure the safety of workers and service users
- Providing support to workers such as referring to the employee assistance program

A failure to meet this responsibility may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

5. Review

This policy shall be reviewed every 3 years.

This policy remains in effect unless otherwise determined by resolution of the Board of Directors.

6. Related Documents

Policies

ICH Code of Conduct Policy
ICH Confidentiality Policy
ICH Conflict of Interest Policy
ICH Feedback and Complaints Policy

References

Professional Boundaries Policy, FSG Australia