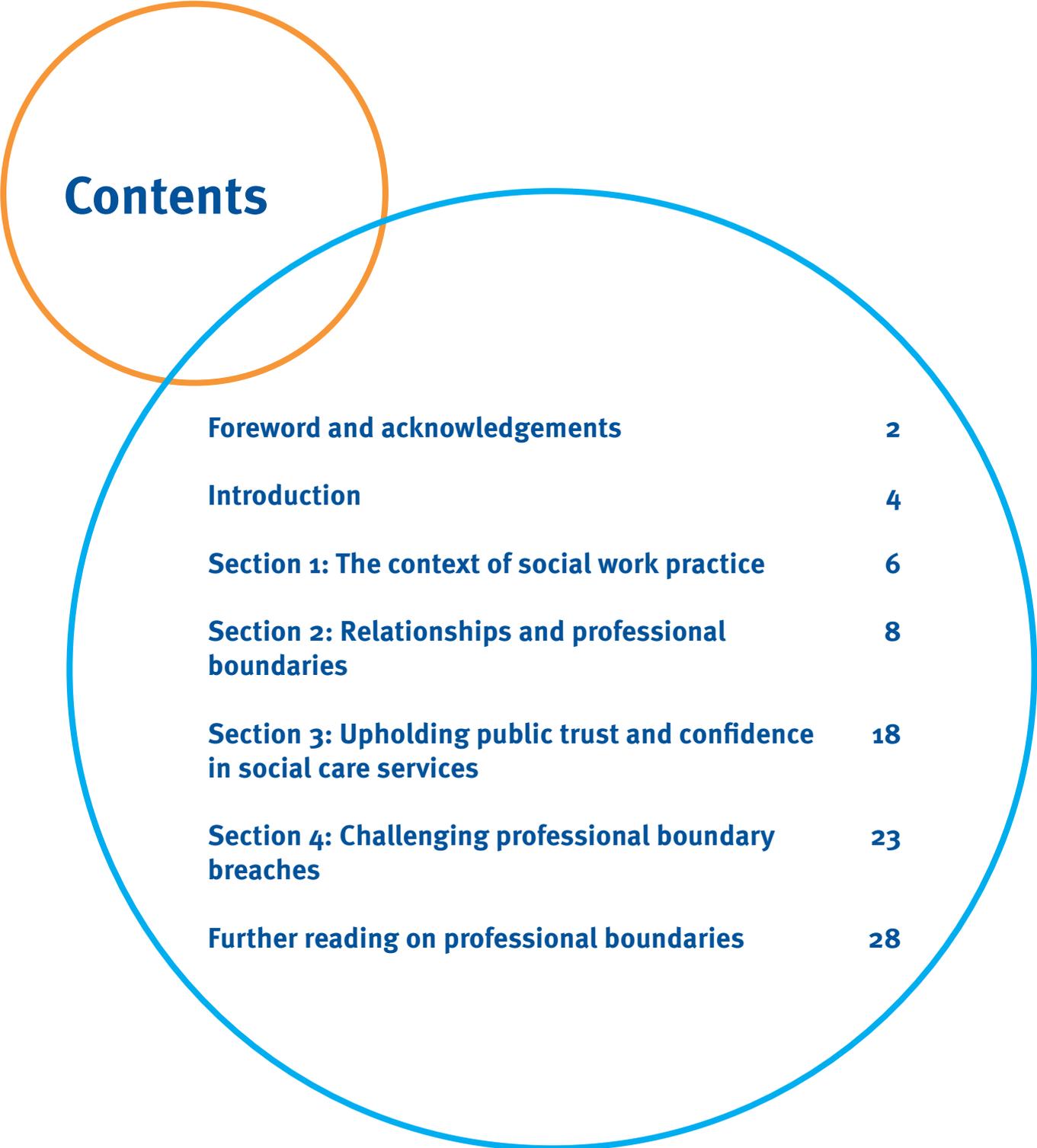




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A large graphic composed of four overlapping circles. The top circle is light green, the bottom-left is blue, the bottom-right is yellow, and the central intersection of all four is a dark teal color. The title text is centered within this dark teal area.

Professional Boundaries
Guidance for social workers



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Foreword and acknowledgements

One important responsibility that social workers have is ensuring that the relationships they have with service users and service users' friends and families are professional relationships.

Social work practice is challenging and social workers regularly face complex and difficult situations. One important responsibility that social workers have is ensuring that the relationships they have with service users and service users' friends and families are professional relationships.

Following concern regarding the volume of professional boundaries issues resulting in conduct hearings, the GSCC commissioned two research reports. These reports have influenced the approach taken to developing this guidance. The key messages from the research were, firstly, the considerable harm that professional boundaries violations can have on service users and, secondly, the inadvisability of attempting to address this problem through issuing a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts'¹.

This guidance uses real examples of conduct hearings where social workers have been found guilty of misconduct for professional boundaries violations. These case studies are used as an aid to provoke reflection and discussion about behaviour inside and outside of work, including discussion on 'grey areas'. We hope this will be used by social workers and by their teams to reflect on and improve their practice. The responsibilities of employers to support social workers are emphasised in the guidance, particularly with respect to supervision. The guidance also uses the views of some service users to highlight the impact boundary violations can have.

1. The two research reports are available on the GSCC's website:

www.gsc.org.uk/cmsFiles/Publications/GSCC_Professional_Boundaries_Full_Report_2009.pdf

www.gsc.org.uk/cmsFiles/Publications/GSCC_Professional_Boundaries_Research_Report_2009.pdf

A wide range of people across the social work sector have contributed to the development of this guidance. One or more drafts of the guidance have been shared with the following individuals or organisations:

Peter Allmark (Sheffield Hallam University);
Dorit Braun (The College of Social Work);
Northern Ireland Social Care Council;
Jill Crawford (GSCC Council Board member);
Christine Davies (C4Eo director);
Alastair Gibbons (Assistant Director – Specialist Services, Milton Keynes Council);
Helen Lincoln (Social Work Reform Board/Director for Children’s Social Care and Youth Offending, Essex Council);
Anne Mercer (Joint Social Work Unit);
Peter Nelson (Sheffield Hallam University);
Gordon Ratcliffe; (GSCC Council Board member); and
Steven Shardlow (University of Salford).

Additionally, two focus groups were held with social workers and social work managers which generated very useful suggestions for the guidance.

We would like to thank all of those who contributed to shaping this guidance. The GSCC is, of course, responsible for the final form that it has taken.

Introduction

The guidance is intended to be an aid to reflection which assists social workers to appropriately manage professional boundaries.

What is the purpose of this guidance?

The purpose of this guidance is to increase public protection by helping to ensure that all social workers practice ethically. The guidance is intended to be an aid to reflection which assists social workers to appropriately manage professional boundaries.

The guidance has been designed for social workers to use on their own. However, it is also intended that the case examples could provide useful points for reflection and discussion in supervision or in team meetings. This guidance should be used in conjunction with the standards produced by the regulator, along with relevant ethical frameworks.²

Only a tiny minority of social workers have ever been taken through conduct proceedings by their regulator due to breaches of professional boundaries.³ The vast majority of social workers endeavour to uphold the interests of the service users they work with. However, of those social workers who have been taken through conduct proceedings, a considerable proportion of cases have arisen due to breaches of professional boundaries.

Social workers breaching professional boundaries can cause significant harm and distress to service users. Furthermore, professional boundaries is a subject that causes confusion and concern for some social workers, and there is an absence of resources for them to draw upon. This guidance provides such a resource.

2. For example, the British Association of Social Workers has a Code of Ethics (www.basw.co.uk); and the International Federation of Social Workers has **Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles** (www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html)

3. Currently the United Kingdom regulators of social workers are the Care Council for Wales, the General Social Care Council, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and the Scottish Social Care Council.

What are ‘professional boundaries’?

A good definition of the term ‘professional boundary’ is the “boundary between what is acceptable and unacceptable for a professional both at work and outside work”.⁴ The emphasis here should be placed on the word 'professional': some behaviour will always be unacceptable whether or not an individual is a professional. Professional boundaries, though, concern behaviour that is acceptable or unacceptable in light of the fact that an individual is a professional.

The term ‘professional boundaries’ in this guidance is not restricted to sexual behaviour - it includes such behaviour but also other behaviour which has a negative impact on a service user(s) and/or which undermines public trust and confidence in social care services.

What does the guidance consist of?

This guidance is not a list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ for social workers. Rather the majority of this guidance is composed of a series of examples drawn from actual conduct cases. In all the case examples used misconduct was found against the social worker concerned. The areas covered in these examples are not exhaustive of all possible professional boundaries issues, but represent the learning from conduct cases to date. For each example a number of points for reflection are provided.

This guidance is divided into the following sections:

- The context of social work practice;
- Relationships and professional boundaries;
- Upholding public trust and confidence in social care services;
- Challenging professional boundary breaches.

Each section is introduced by discussions of the issues. Finally, a concluding section emphasises some of the key messages from this guidance for social workers and their employers respectively.

Please note that this guidance does not have the same status as the standards set by the regulator. It is intended to support social workers to meet such standards, rather than to add any new responsibilities.

4. **Professional Boundaries Research Report**, Sheffield Hallam University. Available at: www.gsc.org.uk/cmsFiles/Publications/GSCC_Professional_Boundaries_Research_Report_2009.pdf

Section 1:

The context of social work practice

Social workers should foster and engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions

Social workers are expected to practice according to social work values. It is a requirement of the social work degree that qualified social workers are able to understand, critically analyse, evaluate and apply such values. These values place expectations and responsibilities on social workers that extend beyond their working hours.

In the United Kingdom social work is a regulated profession. This means that social workers must adhere to the standards set out by the regulator. Social workers who exploit or abuse service users, or who act in a way which brings the profession into disrepute can expect to be held accountable for their actions by the regulator. The regulator has a range of sanctions that it can impose including removing an individual from the register.

However, whilst some behaviour will always be unacceptable, there are also 'grey areas' with respect to professional

boundaries. The concept of 'grey areas' refers to the fact that whilst some actions are always wrong, there are actions which may be acceptable depending on the context. For instance, in some situations hugging a service user would be appropriate, whilst in others it would not. Such actions are not necessarily problematic and may, indeed, be beneficial to a service user. Any such actions should be transparently managed and recorded by the social worker and their supervisor.

Regular discussion with colleagues and managers regarding ethical issues is a key aspect of good social work practice. As the International Federation of Social Workers guidance states:

“Social workers should foster and engage in ethical debate with their colleagues and employers and take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions”.⁵

5. International Federation of Social Workers, **Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles**. Available from: www.ifsw.org/f38000032.html

6. 'Appropriate authorities' would include service regulators. For example, in England at the time of writing the service regulator for children's social care is Ofsted, whilst the service regulator for adult social care is the Care Quality Commission.

Regular supervision, in the sense of professional caseworker supervision of practice, is an important support for social workers. This needs to be provided by employers, and utilised by social workers. Social workers work within a specific employment context. At times this context can present difficulties with respect to achieving effective, value-based practice. Social workers can be faced with such issues as limited resources, large case loads, minimal support or a lack of regular supervision. When faced with such difficulties, social workers should bring these to the attention of their employer. If their employer does not take action to resolve them, then social workers should bring these problems to the attention of other appropriate authorities.⁶

There are a number of general questions, set out on the right, which social workers should consider whenever they have concerns about their own practice. Any such concerns should also be discussed by the social worker with their line manager.

General professional boundaries questions:

- Would you be comfortable discussing all of your actions, and the rationale for those actions, in a supervision session with your manager?
- Would you be uncomfortable about a colleague or your manager observing your behaviour?
- If challenged, could you give an explanation as to how your actions are grounded in social work values?
- Do your actions comply with the relevant policies of your employer?

Social Work Values

A number of statements of social work values can be found in the social care sector. At the time of writing this guidance, the National Occupational Standards for Social Work (available from www.skillsforcare.org.uk) form the basis of the social work degree. These include a section on social work values which states that social workers must:

- a) Have respect for:
 - individuals, families, carers, groups and communities regardless of their age, ethnicity, culture, level of understanding and need;
 - the expertise and knowledge individuals, families, carers, groups and communities have about their own situation.
- b) Empower individuals, families, carers, groups and communities in decisions affecting them.
- c) Be honest about:
 - the power invested in them, including legal powers;
 - their role and resources available to meet need.
- d) Respect confidentiality, and inform individuals, families, carers, groups and communities about when information needs to be shared with others.
- e) Be able to:
 - challenge discriminatory images and practices affecting individuals, families, carers, groups and communities;
 - put individuals, families, carers, groups and communities first.

Section 2:

Relationships and professional boundaries

It is always the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that the relationship remains a professional one and that the service user understands the social worker's role in their life.

A central reason for requiring social workers to manage their relationships with service users, service users' friends and families and ex-service users is the existence of a power imbalance in this relationship. This power imbalance occurs because of the following factors:

- individuals may not be free to choose whether they engage with social workers, but may be under compulsion to do so or may feel they have to do so, for example, in order to gain access to resources;
- social workers have access to intimate knowledge about service users and about their significant others;
- at the point when social workers become involved, a service user may be distressed, confused and/or suffering from mental illness;
- social workers may be working with individuals where the possibility of statutory intervention is present: the removal of a child from a family or the compulsory admission of someone who is mentally ill;
- social workers may be making significant decisions regarding service users' access to resources.

This power imbalance should not be regarded negatively, but should be acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of such relationships. The power that social workers have helps to put them in a position where they can help service users to make positive changes in their lives. However, this power can also be abused. The existence of this power imbalance should be a central consideration when social workers form and manage their relationships with service

users, their friends and family, and also with ex-service users.

In general terms, social workers need to ensure that they act in the best interests of service users. Service users' interests can, though, conflict with each other - for instance when working with a parent and a child - and there are situations where the broader interests of society must take precedent, such as when a service user constitutes a risk to others. These are some of the complexities that social workers confront in their work.

The relationship between the social worker and service user can be misconstrued by the service user. In some cases it may be the service user who attempts to act in a way that, if reciprocated, would result in a social worker breaching professional boundaries.

Regardless of this, it is always the responsibility of the social worker to ensure that the relationship remains a professional one and that the service user understands the social worker's role in their life.

Working closely with individuals in difficult circumstances for considerable periods of time can also result in strong emotions, whether positive or negative, on the part of social workers towards those they work with or vice versa. Social workers need to be conscious of, and be reflective regarding, these emotions. Social workers need to be sure that the judgements that they make are professional judgements, grounded in social work values.

Service users' perceptions of their relationship with social workers

Service users can recognise the power imbalance that exists in their relationship with social workers. They can also recognise both the positive impact that the majority of social workers have, and the risks that attach

to this relationship: Social workers should not enter into a relationship with a service user outside their professional role. It should be noted that such a relationship can arise inadvertently, for instance a social worker discovering that

“A lot of people are quite scared of social workers. Because of the power they have. The power can be for good or ill. And I have had a very positive and a very negative experience – even with the same social worker.”

“Some social workers, like the one I had, are deliberately predatory people. But there are probably lots of other social workers who find themselves sliding down that slippery slope without realising how they came there. It’s incredibly important to understand how they get themselves into these situations of blurring the boundaries. They might have good intentions and despite themselves, find themselves in that situation.”

“My social worker had a positive impact on my life and really helped me change my circumstances around.”

“A social worker is party to personal information that can make for an unequal footing.”

“I think they generally do a good job in horrendous circumstances. The one I had was a very decent person.”

(Quotations taken from various GSCC publications)

they and a service user they are working with have a child in the same class at a school. A social worker who finds themselves in such a situation should bring this to the attention of their employer immediately.

In addition to the points for reflection in the conduct case examples that follow, there are general questions which social workers should consider whenever they have concerns about their relationships with service users and professional boundaries.

Relationship questions:

- Is your relationship focused on promoting the wellbeing of the service user?
- Are your personal needs being met through your contact with the service user?
- Has the service user ever behaved in a way that suggests that they have misunderstood your professional relationship?
- Is your relationship with the service user, their friends or family, adversely influencing your professional judgement?
- Is the only relationship you are having with the service user, their friends and their family a professional one? If not, have you made your employer aware of this?

Conduct hearing examples

What follows are examples of conduct cases involving relationships, both sexual and non-sexual, and professional boundaries. In all examples throughout the guidance the regulator found that the social worker concerned had committed misconduct.

Example 1

The social worker had been allocated the case of a young woman who was suffering from depression. Prior to the incident in question, although no formal decision had been reached to close the case, the social worker had discussed with his line manager whether his role was due to end. The social worker had a meeting with the woman at his place of work towards the end of an afternoon. During the course of the meeting, the woman became upset when the social worker made reference to her case closing. The social worker suggested that they continued the session elsewhere. He did not inform anyone else of his intention. At the social worker's suggestion, they continued the meeting at a local public house.

Points for reflection:

- What constitutes an appropriate location for a meeting with service user?

During the course of their meeting, the social worker suggested that he could see the woman as a private client.

- Was his suggestion that the service user could become a private client wrong? Why?
- Is it ever appropriate for a social worker to suggest a service user becomes a private client?

Furthermore, during their time in the public house the social worker complimented the woman on her physical appearance.

- Is it ever appropriate for a social worker to compliment a service user on their appearance?

The social worker made negative comments about the institution of marriage to the service user, who was married. He also suggested that he could pay for the service user to go to university.

- Is it ever appropriate for social workers to tell service users about their views on subjects like marriage?
- Are there circumstances when it is acceptable for a social work to offer to use their own money to help a service user?

The social worker frequently touched and played with the woman's hands during the meeting in the public house. As they left the public house, the social worker hugged and kissed the woman. There was no further contact between the social worker and the service user after this evening.

- What impact could this behaviour have on the service user?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 2

A social work student was allocated the case of two children, siblings, who were living with their parents. As part of this role the social work student gained access to confidential information about this family. This included being provided with information by the mother of the children, who was herself regarded as a vulnerable individual.

Whilst she was on placement working with these children, she met by chance the father of the children at a nightclub and began a relationship with him. She did not inform her employer about this ongoing relationship. Her professional judgement in her role as the allocated social worker for the two children appeared to be influenced by this relationship. She allowed the children to stay at her house whilst the mother of the children was in hospital.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- If the social work student had been qualified would this have made any difference?
- Should the social work student have discussed this relationship with her employer? Why?
- What would you do if a service user approached you and began talking to you in a nightclub or public house?
- What would you do if a service user approached you in a nightclub or wedding function and asked you to dance with them?
- What, if anything, should a social worker do if they find themselves attracted to a service user?
- What do you think the potential impact that the social work student's behaviour could have, both on the children concerned and their family?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 3

The social worker was the allocated case worker for an adult service user. This service user was suffering from severe long term health problems and had discussed with the social worker his personal care needs.

In the course of her role as his allocated case worker, the social worker became increasingly personal with the service user, discussing her own experiences and views. She asked him if she could see him on a non-professional basis and provided him with her personal mobile phone number and email address. The social worker did not inform her employer of this relationship.

The relationship was not a sexual one. It was, though, a relationship outside of her role as his social worker. The relationship involved personal meetings at the service user's home, outings, the exchange of gifts, discussion of spiritual matters and other common interests.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- Should the social worker have informed her employer about this developing relationship? Why?
- What could the impact of this behaviour be, both on the service user and on their significant others?
- Is it ever acceptable to give or receive gifts from service users?
- Should a social worker discuss their religious or spiritual beliefs with a service user?
- Is it appropriate for a social worker to disclose to a service user an experience they have had in their personal life? Why?
- Could this relationship have impacted upon the professional judgement of the social worker? How?
- Is it ever acceptable for a social worker to instigate a personal relationship with a service user when they are that individual's social worker?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 4

The social worker was employed as a team manager in a fostering team. Whilst working in this role, the team manager engaged in a number of activities with looked after children whose cases were allocated to members of his team. His actions included:

- taking a child to a football match;
- taking a child out for a meal;
- taking a number of children swimming;
- buying one child an Xbox;
- paying a child to clean his car;
- taking a child to his home address.

There was no professional reason for any of these actions – they were not part of any care plan and had not been discussed with the allocated social worker. The team manager did not record these actions in the relevant care files and did not inform his own manager about them.

The team manager's motivation in all cases was one of helping the children concerned. There was no evidence to show that any

looked after child had suffered direct harm as a result of the team manager's actions.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- Would any of these actions would have been acceptable if they had been undertaken by the looked after children's own social worker? Why?
- What potential impact could the team manager's actions have on the children concerned, their friends and family?
- Why might it have been important for the team manager to have discussed his actions with his employer?
- Why might the team manager's failure to record these actions be significant?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 5

The individual was a registered social worker. However he was working in a non-social work role - as a leader in charge with a youth club. Whilst in this role, the registrant formed a close relationship with a young female, under 18 years of age, towards whom he was in a position of trust.

On a number of occasions the social worker took the young woman out to public houses and purchased alcohol for her. He did not inform his employers that he was doing this.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- Does it matter that the registrant was employed in a non-social work role? Why?
- What could the potential impact of this behaviour be on the young woman?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Section 3:

Upholding public trust and confidence in social care services

The ability to undertake this role becomes difficult if social workers do not have the trust and confidence of service users or of the public more generally.

Social work requires intervening in the private lives of service users – having access to information about and making decisions that will affect service users’ relationships, finances, personal problems and, potentially, liberty. The ability to undertake this role becomes difficult if social workers do not have the trust and confidence of service users or of the public more generally.

‘Professional boundaries’, as used in this guidance, does not only cover the direct relationship between the social worker and the service user. It also covers other standards of behaviour that are expected of professionals inside and outside work. There is often a requirement placed on professionals by regulators that both inside and outside work they will behave in a way which will ‘uphold public trust in the

profession’, or wording to this effect. At the point of drafting this guidance, the relevant standard for social workers in the United Kingdom was that “as a social care worker, you must uphold public trust and confidence in social care services”.⁸

This broad requirement, or its equivalent, is not intended to place unreasonable restrictions on social workers’ behaviour. For instance, it is not intended to prohibit social workers from being able to go out socially. The key issue in this respect is whether the behaviour of a social worker, whether inside or outside work, is such that it could potentially damage the reputation of the profession unless action is taken by the regulator. In this section examples are given of conduct cases which involved such issues.

8. **Codes of Practice for Employers** – Code 5. Shared in common when this guidance was being written by the four UK social work regulators (Care Council for Wales, General Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Scottish Social Care Council)

In addition to the points of reflection in the case examples that follow, there are also general questions which social workers should consider whenever they have concerns about whether or not their behaviour or actions are likely to lead to the undermining of public trust and confidence in social care services.

Upholding public trust and confidence questions:

- Is your behaviour outside work having a negative impact on your ability to fulfil your social work responsibilities?
- Would your behaviour have the potential to cause current or future service users to have a lack of confidence in you?
- Does your behaviour, whether inside or outside work, have the potential to undermine the public's trust and confidence in social care services?

Conduct hearing examples

Example 6

The social worker was employed as a fieldwork team manager. During the course of his employment he received a number of offensive emails via his employer's email system. In response the social worker:

- forwarded some of the emails to colleagues within his place of work;
- replied to some of the emails with comments which were themselves offensive; and
- did not bring any of these emails to the attention of his employer.

A number of these emails contained inappropriate, although not pornographic, images of children. For instance, one email with the subject "Anything to declare

sir?" depicted Garry Glitter (convicted sex offender Paul Gadd) carrying a bag which appeared to contain a child through customs.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- What would you do if you received an offensive email at work?
- Why might this behaviour undermine public trust and confidence in social work?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 7

Whilst in employment, the registrant created a publicly available blog which was based in part on her experiences at work. She continued to update this blog over a three-month period. The contents of this blog included:

- derogatory and/or racist comments about people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds from the registrant;
- personal information and derogatory remarks about children who attended her work;
- personal information about the parent of a child who attended her work;
- derogatory remarks about parents of children who attended her work;
- personal information and derogatory remarks about her colleagues.

The personal information about individuals that the registrant placed on her blog had been acquired during the course of her employment. The registrant had not informed her employer of the fact that

she was writing this blog. The information contained in the blog was sufficient to enable the identification of both the registrant's place of work and the service users in her care.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- Is it acceptable for a registrant to express racist or other discriminatory views outside work?
- What restrictions - if any - should a social worker observe if they decide to write a blog about their work?
- At what point should the registrant have discussed this blog with their employer?
- Might this behaviour undermine public trust and confidence in social work? How?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Example 8

The social worker was the mother of two children. One of her children disclosed to her that an adult male friend of hers (i.e. an adult male friend of the social worker) had displayed sexual interest towards both children.

The social worker did not discuss this issue with her employer, the police or any other appropriate authority. Furthermore, she allowed the adult friend in question to have continued contact with her two children.

Points for reflection:

- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- What should the social worker have done?
- Why would the social worker's behaviour be of concern to her employer?
- Might this behaviour undermine public trust and confidence in social work? How?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Section 4:

Challenging professional boundary breaches

Social workers need to be able to recognise when colleagues are potentially breaching professional boundaries. In such situations social workers must take appropriate action.

As well as being able to able to maintain professional boundaries in their own work, social workers need to be able to recognise when colleagues are potentially breaching professional boundaries. In such situations social workers must take appropriate action.

In addition to the points for reflection in the example case that follow, there are also general questions which social workers should consider whenever they have concerns about colleagues' behaviour.

Challenging professional boundaries breaches questions:

- If you become aware of a colleague acting in a way either inside or outside of work that you believed to be potentially:
 - breaching professional boundaries; and/or
 - damaging to the public trust and confidence in social work;

how would you act to appropriately address this concern?

- If you are uncertain as to whether a colleague's behaviour is breaching professional boundaries, have you spoken to anyone about this?
- Why do social workers have a responsibility to discuss and challenge their colleague's behaviour?

Conduct hearing examples

Example 9

The social worker became aware that one of his colleagues, who he was friendly with, was engaged in a sexual relationship with a 14-year-old girl. The social worker did not report this relationship to his employer, to the police or to any other appropriate authority.

Points for reflection:

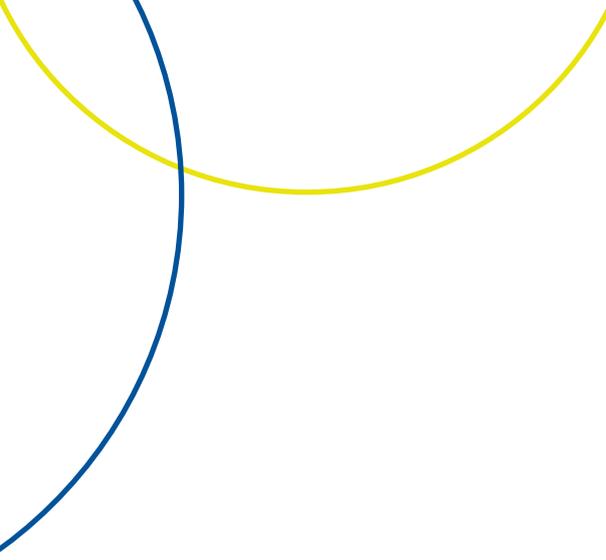
- Why is this behaviour misconduct?
- What should the social worker have done differently?
- Which aspects of social work values have been breached in this example?
- Which parts of the regulator's standards for the profession might have been breached in this example?

Key messages for social workers and employers of social workers

It has been emphasised in this guidance that:

- professional boundaries concern what is acceptable and unacceptable for a professional both at work and outside work;
- the vast majority of social workers endeavour to uphold the interests of the service users they work with;
- only a tiny minority of social workers have ever been taken through conduct proceedings by their regulators due to breaches of professional boundaries;
- service users are often unaware of what the legitimate role of a social worker is;
- social workers breaching professional boundaries can cause significant harm and distress to service users;
- social workers should make professional judgements based on social work values, and should act on the basis of such judgements;
- social work is a regulated profession. Social workers must adhere to the standards set by their regulator. Regulators have sanctions they can impose when social workers' behaviour calls into question their suitability to practice;
- there are 'grey areas' in social work practice. Working in grey areas should always be transparently managed and recorded by a social worker and their supervisor;
- social workers need the trust and confidence of the public if they are to undertake their role effectively.

There are a number of actions that social workers can take to help to ensure that they are able to appropriately manage professional boundary issues.



What can social workers do to ensure they are able to appropriately manage professional boundary issues?

- Use this guidance as an aid to reflect on professional boundaries issues.
 - Challenge employers who fail to give you appropriate support, including regular supervision.
 - Instigate discussions of ethical issues with your colleagues.
 - Utilise supervision to discuss any concerns you have about your practice.
 - Be open about your practice with your line manager.
 - Ensure that you regularly reflect on the relationship between your practice and social work values.
- Be aware of the power balance that exists between you and the service users you work with.
 - Ensure that you are familiar with the standards set by your regulator.
 - Ensure that you are familiar with the relevant policies of your employer, such as on:
 - confidentiality
 - dress code;
 - electronic communication;
 - lone working;
 - out of hours working;
 - physical contact;
 - risk management.
 - Remember that it is your responsibility to ensure that your relationship with service users remains a professional one.

There are also a number of actions that employers of social workers can take to try to support social workers in this respect.

What should employers do to support social workers to appropriately manage professional boundary issues?

- Ensure that social workers have access to regular supervision.
 - Use this guidance in supervision and team meetings to facilitate discussion of professional boundaries issues.
 - Try to facilitate a culture where staff regularly discuss ethical practice.
- Ensure that social workers have access to, and are familiar with, the standards set by their regulator.
 - Ensure that staff have access to, and are familiar with, relevant employer policies, such as on:
 - confidentiality
 - dress code;
 - electronic communication;
 - lone working;
 - out of hours working;
 - physical contact;
 - risk management.

Further reading on professional boundaries

During the development of this guidance two research reports were commissioned, one from Sheffield Hallam University and one from the professional boundaries charity Witness. Both provide further discussion of professional boundaries issues, whilst the former analyses the available literature on the subject. Both can be accessed from the General Social Care Council's website:

**'Professional Boundaries in Social Work: A Qualitative Study',
Witness:**

www.gsccl.org.uk/cmsFiles/Publications/GSCC_Professional_Boundaries_Full_Report_2009.pdf

**'Professional Boundaries Research Report', Sheffield Hallam
University:**

www.gsccl.org.uk/cmsFiles/Publications/GSCC_Professional_Boundaries_Research_Report_2009.pdf



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