

# BCAN Homeless Forum Shared Guidelines Volunteer Handbook

(This is extracted from the Cold Weather Group's handbook)

## What volunteers do

### ***Talk to people!***

Volunteers have sometimes told us they didn't feel they were doing anything useful, as 'all they did' was talk to night centre users.

Don't underestimate it – from a night centre user's point of view, this can be the most valuable thing a volunteer can do. For people with years of daily experience of discrimination, abuse and exclusion, a good friendly relationship and a decent conversation with a person who isn't judging them can make the difference between the night centre just being a place to sleep, and somewhere which feels welcoming and warm. This is what last years night centre users had to say:

*Staff and volunteers were helpful and friendly... staff and volunteers are very good and adultish... volunteers are friendly and approachable...*

The other side of this is that for some night centre users, the night centre is the first bit of privacy and comfort they have had for ages. If someone wants to spend all the time in bed and not talking, then that's fine!

### ***Use any skills you have***

If you have any skills in painting, music, crafts or running workshops, do it! Tell us if you need particular resources or materials and we'll do our best to get them. Take up from night centre users can be low but it's still of enormous value to those who do not want to use it.

### ***Encourage people to look after the place***

It's difficult to make the transition from living on the street to living in a building, and sometimes the place can become a bit of a tip. Some night centre users (and some volunteers) have suggested that people could all have a domestic job to do. We don't want to impose this on anyone, but some people may like to do it and lots of people will appreciate the difference it makes.

### ***Ask the staff***

Staffing is minimal and there will always be jobs to do – don't be shy about asking.

## Confidentiality

Night centre users should be informed at the earliest opportunity that any information they disclose will be shared among the staff team, and cannot be kept confidential to one worker/volunteer.

## ***Ownership of information***

All information that someone shares about himself or herself should be regarded as the personal property of that person. In other words, the information is 'on loan' and should remain under the control of the person it is about. We must always obtain permission from the person before we share information about them beyond boundaries already agreed in advance.

If there has been no prior agreement then we don't have permission to share the information with anyone else. We should always check that the person is happy for us to share their information with another person or organisation.

## ***Basic rules***

- Personal information regarding night centre users must stay within the staff/volunteer team. All personal files must be kept in a safe and secure place to ensure the information is protected.
- Staff/volunteers should not discuss individuals within earshot of other night centre users or people outside the team.
- Staff/volunteers should not disclose information about night centre users to other agencies/individuals without the consent of the night centre user concerned.
- In the event of a caller inquiring whether a specific person is a night centre user they should not be given this information. Take the caller's details and pass on to the night centre user, so that they may decide for themselves whether or not they want to make contact.

## ***Exceptions – you may...***

- Need to share information with other agencies regarding a night centre user in order to be able to provide the best service and support to that person – e.g. liaising with the Benefits Agency, drug and alcohol agencies, housing providers etc. In this situation you must get the consent of the individual night centre user.
- Inform other hostels/agencies of any individual who is regarded as posing a risk to staff or night centre users of other projects, after consultation with a Senior Project Worker.
- Give information to medical authorities if a night centre user requires emergency treatment.
- Give information to relevant authorities if there is a child protection or public safety issue after consultation with a Senior Project Worker.

## **Professional Boundaries**

Boundaries outline what is and what is not acceptable behaviour by staff and volunteers in the workplace, and help to protect and inform both workers and users.

Boundaries give workers confidence as they know how to react in different situations, and they help to develop trusting relationships with service users who will know what to expect

from workers.

Boundaries are particularly challenging in right centre user projects, because they are more intense. Workers see people at all their highest and lowest points and consequently get to know them very well.

The following list of dos and don'ts is not exhaustive, but gives a rough guide to the types of things workers need to consider.

## ***DON'TS***

### ***Socialising***

Do not socialise with night centre users outside of work time, or have sexual relations with night centre users. If a night centre user expresses a sexual interest in you politely but clearly inform them that you are a worker and you are bound not to do so. If it persists, it may begin to be harassment – be firm and clear and inform a member of staff.

#### *Reasons:*

Socialising with night centre users blurs the private and professional roles. It may make challenging that particular individual at work very difficult. It may make maintaining confidentiality a problem. Other workers and night centre users may be resentful and suspect favouritism. It is likely to make you confuse your emotional needs and the needs of the night centre user.

#### *Exceptions:*

Socialising with night centre users **in work time** is fine within health and safety guidelines, provided it is made clear that this is part of your support role. If you have a chance social meeting (in a pub for example) you should, without being rude, make it clear that you are not 'at work' and are having time out. If the night centre user persists with trying to stay it may be appropriate to leave.

### ***Personal information***

Never give out personal information about your work colleagues, and be very careful about information you disclose about yourself. Don't give out your address, phone number or personal information such as your health.

#### *Reasons:*

You may open up yourself or others to robbery, harassment or violence if you upset someone, for example if you have to evict them. Workers may receive abusive phone calls if their telephone number is known. People may be embarrassed or very sensitive about personal information of any kind being known in the hostel where it could negatively affect their future working relationships.

#### *Exceptions:*

Disclosing some personal information at work is necessary to develop relationships with users e.g. your preferences, interests, and life experiences if appropriate, but think of the potential consequences of any disclosure. If in doubt don't say it – you can always do so later

when you've thought more about it.

## ***Drink and Drugs***

Don't come into work drunk or under the influence of non-prescribed drugs.

### *Reasons:*

Your judgement, emotions and ability to cope with challenging situations will be affected. Night centre users with dependency problems may find intoxicated staff unacceptable. The Cold Weather night centre's insurance is invalid if a worker is intoxicated.

## ***Betting***

Don't put bets on for night centre users, ask other centre users to put bets on for you or encourage gambling in any way (including The Lottery or Grand National).

### *Reasons:*

Gambling can be addictive and is usually a waste of money. The handling of winnings may put temptation unnecessarily in the way of night centre users and workers, and lead to accusations against you.

## ***Gifts***

Don't give or receive personal gifts to or from night centre users.

### *Reasons:*

Receiving gifts from people on low incomes is inappropriate and may be compromising if they turn out to be stolen. It may give the impression of favouritism which other workers and night centre users will resent.

## ***Lending and borrowing***

Do not lend or borrow from night centre users, especially money.

### *Reasons:*

Pressure for the return of a borrowed item could strain the worker/night centre user relationship and affect hostel work. Items could be stolen, or it could give an impression of favouritism.

### *Exceptions.*

It may be appropriate to lend or borrow non-valuable items (e.g. books and tapes) as long as workers and night centre users are clear about the consequences of non-return or damage of property. Responsibility must lie with you.

## ***Buying***

Don't buy anything from a night centre user or sell anything to them.

### *Reasons:*

Items you buy or sell could be stolen or illegal (e.g. duty-free tobacco). It is immoral to make money out of people you work with, especially if they are on low incomes. It may detrimentally alter the worker-client relationship.

### *Exceptions:*

The Big Issue.

## **Favouritism**

Don't show favouritism to any night centre users (even though it is impossible not like or dislike certain individuals more than others).

### *Reasons:*

All night centre users need time and support, not just those that we like best or get on with. It's useful to develop the skills to establish contact with all types of people. Favouritism creates resentment, which can upset the harmony of the hostel.

### *Exceptions:*

At certain times, different night centre users will be in a crisis where they will need a lot of staff input.

## **Lying and Misleading**

Don't lie to, mislead, or give unrealistic information to night centre users.

### *Reasons:*

Workers are in positions of trust and to lie or mislead is an abuse of this. Unrealistic expectations can jeopardise a person's chances of progression, and make them feel like they have 'failed', as what they expected didn't happen.

### *Exceptions:*

If the health or safety of a colleague or night centre user may be jeopardised by being honest.

## **DOS**

### **Joking**

Do be careful when joking with night centre users.

### *Reasons:*

Jokes about how you may evict a certain night centre user if they do or don't do a certain thing can be taken more seriously than you realise. Well-intended jokes can easily hurt a person's feelings, set up challenging situations and even lead to formal complaints.

### *Exceptions:*

When you have developed a good trusting relationship with someone, joking may be fine.

## ***Challenge colleagues***

Do challenge other workers who you feel are overstepping boundaries or being unprofessional – and do it privately and as constructively as possible.

### ***Reasons:***

So that the unprofessional behaviour will stop. As a learning opportunity for the worker.  
To protect users from abuse

### ***Exceptions:***

If you feel uncomfortable challenging a colleague, report it to management who can challenge for you if appropriate.

## ***Respect colleagues***

Do respect colleagues when on shift.

### ***Reasons:***

To support each other e.g. not to contradict one another and respect one another's boundaries. To share the workload. To be consistent in front of other night centre users.

## **Managing challenging and aggressive behaviour**

### ***Anticipating, risk assessment and avoiding violence***

- It is obviously better to avoid violence by establishing a safe project. Good teamwork is vital – know your team, pass on information, e.g. incidents, personality clashes, breakages, and vibes. Keep checking in with each other.
- Be aware of your environment, e.g. staffing levels, roles, blindspots, possible flashpoints etc.
- Be aware of your client group – know them and be known, be aware of their names, friends, their state (e.g. hungry, tired, frustrated, drunk, drugged, gender, race etc.). Be aware of any altered behavioural patterns, and any build up
- Be aware of yourself, know your weaknesses, avoid unsafe places, don't take it personally, get someone else to deal with it, be aware of stress levels, keep team consistency, use supervision/support, share feelings.
- Never have potential weapons lying around, e.g. milk bottles, scissors etc. If this is not practical put them out of reach or sight as soon as you think violence might occur. If you can't do this without the aggressor seeing, then leave them alone as it may give people ideas.
- Be very alert to the possibility of violence. The point of intervention varies from situation to situation and in some cases intervention is inappropriate and may actually spark off violence. Monitor signs of impending trouble. This is of course easier if you know the individuals involved, but never ignore the sounds of raised voices, bumps and thuds etc.

- If possible, warn clients in advance of any possible disappointments, problems etc. Often we are afraid of clients with short fuses and we consciously or unconsciously portray things in a rosier light than we would for others. It is better to be brave early on than hope that whatever it is will not happen.
- Let colleagues know where you are going and how long you expect to be wherever possible. It may be useful to agree with colleagues in advance a subtle signal to let them know that you may need help.

### ***Managing violent or aggressive situations***

- Before you become involved in a situation, where possible assess the risks involved to yourself, colleagues and other right centre users. Get rid of people who are not involved – sometimes other people can be helpful and if you are concerned you may decide not to do this, but an audience may make things worse.
- Don't back either yourself or the client into a corner – be aware of your escape routes as you enter the situation and also allow the aggressor away out. Physically make sure they are able to get out of the room easily, psychologically make sure they can back down easily without losing face, particularly if other people are present. For example, offer alternatives, agree to talk later, ask them to think about it, say you want to think about it etc.
- Make sure the environment is as calm and normal as possible e.g. turn on lights, turn off TV, open curtains etc.
- Don't get between fighters.
- If you suspect you are making things worse, or that you may be in danger, remove yourself from the situation – don't be a hero. If you feel the situation is dangerous and beyond your control, the guideline is to get out. You may feel that the situation requires police help – don't be afraid to call the police if a situation reaches this point.
- Be careful with body language. Take care not to stoop or look apologetic, neither should you look defensive or aggressive. What you are aiming for is assertive and confident so stand straight, use open hand gestures and an open, interested expression. Don't move quickly, don't point your finger at the person, don't clench your fists etc.
- Make sure that the person has physical space. Many people feel threatened if you stand too close or 'over' them.
- Try to engage in a routine physical activity, e.g. roll a cigarette, clear up etc.
- Be objective and calm. Make sure you listen to what the person has to say before deciding what to do. Be clear about the facts and let them know that you have heard what they have to say (even if you then have to say there is nothing you can do about it).
- Don't promise anything you can't deliver – if you let them down, you may make things more difficult for yourself and the next person who has to deal with them

- Don't row with the clients. This is not the same as being angry, which is sometimes appropriate, but if you lose your own temper, you have stepped out of the role and lost control of the situation.
- Use your voice, speak calmly, be honest and straightforward. Speaking lightly, calmly, slowly or affectionately can also have a dramatic effect on an atmosphere full of noise and tension. There is no hard and fast rule but this can work particularly well if someone has been drinking or using drugs. They may not be able to hear these words properly, but they can hear the tone.
- Remind the individual what they may lose if they continue to act in this way, and ask them if it is worth it.
- It may be appropriate to leave the client alone - i.e. don't ignore them but let them know that you are leaving them in peace for a bit and that you will see them later.
- Be clear about what you are going to do, and let them know any future action that is likely to happen.
- Try to leave the client's self-respect intact

### ***After the event (depending on the nature of the event)***

- Get the aggressors out – you may need help from colleagues, police etc.
- Secure the building, keep away from vulnerable buildings etc.
- Clear up, reassure and support other night centre users and staff. Show that it is all under control. If you feel unable to do this, be honest about it, and look after your own needs. Workers involved in a violent or aggressive incident should be given reassurance and time to get over the incident immediately afterwards.
- All staff need accurate information about the incident as soon as possible.
- Talk it through with another member of staff, get some space, let go of feelings etc. Even small incidents can have long-term effects on confidence.
- Report/record and discuss how the incident was dealt with, who did what, what worked well, what was unhelpful (take care to avoid individual staff from feeling blamed for what occurred).
- Discuss and decide any appropriate actions e.g. evictions, bans, legal action etc.
- Talk to your supervisor – you don't have to have a formal supervision session to talk an incident (no matter how small) over with your supervisor. This should help you to look more objectively at how the situation was managed, remind you that no one is perfect and that dealing with such an incident is a very difficult and skilful thing to do.