



BRIGHTON & HOVE LGBT SWITCHBOARD'S CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY

PRINCIPLES OF THE CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY

The boundaries of confidentiality

All of Switchboard's service users have the right to seek information, support and counselling, safe in the knowledge that they will be assured of confidentiality, and that information they share with volunteers and staff will be treated with respect.

Confidentiality is within the organisation as opposed to being between a service user and an individual volunteer or staff member as it is appropriate and often necessary for volunteers to discuss service users with other volunteers, trustees and the Director in order to receive supervision and support. Switchboard's help-line volunteer support meetings and counselling service support meetings are a confidential space where issues relating to service users can be discussed in an ethical respectful manner.

There are some rare occasions when an ethical decision has to be made that confidentiality needs to be breached. (*See 'Breaches of confidentiality' section*).

Service user's rights to open honest communication

Switchboard aims to have open honest communication with service users and when necessary (as far as is possible) will communicate with service users about confidentiality, and limitations to this. For example, if callers to Switchboard's help-line ask about the limitations to confidentiality volunteers have a responsibility to tell them about confidentiality issues relating to their current call. (For example; that another volunteer is in the room, that a trainee is listening into calls, that a written call log is being kept but does not identify a caller and is for monitoring, training and statistical purposes only). Similarly, if confidentiality may need to be breached for any reason, the service user must be informed of this as far as this is possible.

Professional relationship boundaries to enhance client confidentiality.

If a volunteer or staff member finds themselves presented with a service user who is known to them, for example a friend, acquaintance, colleague, neighbour, it is not appropriate for that worker to be the person to provide information, support or counselling. In this situation the worker must sensitively inform the service user of this and refer them to another worker. For counselling clients this will entail informing the Counselling Coordinator who can re-allocate the service user to another counsellor, for

callers to the help-line the caller can be passed to another help-line volunteer or may need to be asked to phone back at a later date. If a worker is presented with a service user with whom they have had previous contact with through another Switchboard service they must make the caller aware of this and offer them the choice of speaking with someone else either right away if someone is available, or at a later date.

An additional aspect of professional boundaries for all Switchboard volunteers to consider relates to the use of services by those close to them (such as family members, partners etc). Whilst it would not be fair, ethical or possible to prohibit those close to us from using Switchboard services, we must acknowledge that this can present complex issues around confidentiality and boundaries, which require careful management.

When someone close to a volunteer accesses our services, they might choose to talk about highly sensitive and personal issues relating to their relationship with that volunteer. This can be uncomfortable or problematic for all concerned - the volunteer who might be party to sensitive information about one of their colleagues, the volunteer who may have been discussed and, potentially, for the client/ service user. This situation could potentially arise in either of Switchboard's services but may be particularly likely in counselling which lacks the possibility of anonymity offered by the helpline.

In order to manage the issues in the interests of both our volunteers and our service users, it is expected that individual volunteers are mindful of the implications of referring someone close to them to Switchboard. It is also expected that, if a volunteer is aware of someone close to them accessing Switchboard's services they contact the service manager and / or the Director for support, and to ensure action is taken to respect and preserve boundaries.

CONFIDENTIALITY IN RELATION TO SPECIFIC SWITCHBOARD SERVICES

The help-line

- Brighton & Hove LGBT Switchboard's help-line is a confidential help-line provided to people who wish to receive telephone information and support in an anonymous way. For this reason Switchboard has no tracing technology (such as caller display or '1471' option).
- Switchboard's training process for new help-line volunteers includes mentored shifts where new volunteers listen to calls taken by experienced volunteers, and have their calls listened to and monitored by their mentor. Switchboard has a legal duty to make reasonable efforts to communicate this to service users. This does not have to be communicated at the time of the call, and indeed it may not always be possible or appropriate to inform a caller of this at the time. Switchboard informs the public of this monitoring system on its website and in its annual report. If however a caller asks if the call is being monitored the

volunteer **must** be absolutely honest and inform the caller that another volunteer is listening into the call for training purposes. (A reasonable request for the call to be continued without the trainee listening in can be granted by you, although it is not possible for help-line volunteers to agree to vacate the office completely so this should not be agreed to)

- In exceptional circumstances Switchboard will assist external bodies in tracing calls, for further information on this see 'Breaches of confidentiality' section
- In addition to protecting the confidentiality of callers to the help line, Switchboard also wishes to protect the confidentiality of help line volunteers, and it is for this reason that Switchboard's policy prohibits the sharing of information about other volunteers including their names and information from the rota about shift patterns. (Whilst it is acceptable to tell a caller that there is a volunteer of a particular gender on shift at a particular time, it is not acceptable to tell the caller the name of that volunteer.) For the purpose of building rapport with callers volunteers may need to give their first name, volunteers may choose to give a pseudonym which can provide a greater degree of emotional protection and can be helpful when routinely dealing with difficult calls. (This is personal choice)

The Counselling service

- To take account of the distinct and specific nature of Switchboard's Counselling Service the organisation has a specific Counselling service confidentiality procedure that compliments this generic one, and reflects the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's (BACP) Framework for Good Practise. Both confidentiality polices and other relevant counselling service policies and guidelines must inform the counsellor's work, and whilst there is unlikely to be any conflict between the two, in the event of an ethical dilemma arising in relation to confidentiality the counsellor must make good use of managerial support, clinical supervision and the BACP's Framework for Good Practise to reach an ethical decision.

Other face to face services that Switchboard may develop and provide

- Switchboard may develop additional services that provide face to face services for clients, such as drop-ins and support groups. The principles and practical implementation of this policy will apply to all services that Switchboard provides. If any service provided has specific elements regarding confidentiality it will be illustrated in a specific confidentiality statement in relation to that service.

LIMITATIONS TO CONFIDENTIALITY

The nature of the organisation makes it likely that some service users will be anxious about how anonymous their call is; they may not for example wish family members to know that they have contacted the organisation. If appropriate, it may therefore be helpful to assist service users in being fully aware of any limitations to the confidentiality we can provide. For example, it may be appropriate at times to tell callers to the help-line that our telephone number will appear on itemised phone bills and that this cannot be avoided, this will therefore enable the caller to make an informed choice about where they call us from. Similarly, some callers to the help-line requesting a counselling application pack may need reassuring that the pack will be posted in a plain white envelope. For counsellors contacting clients to arrange appointments the client is always asked about the need for discretion and preferred methods of contact via the application form to ensure their confidentiality is protected. All counsellors must adhere to any particular requests regarding methods of contact and they will be informed of this when they are allocated a client.

SITUATIONS WHERE CONFIDENTIALITY MAY NEED TO BE BREACHED.

- There are times when a service user's confidentiality becomes secondary to something or somebody else, and an ethical decision has to be made to inform a third party of something in order to protect somebody.
- Whilst Switchboard has no direct tracing mechanism on the telephones (such as caller display or the 1471 service) Switchboard does have the option of asking their phone provider to assist the authorities in tracing a call. Switchboard takes service user's rights to confidentiality seriously so this decision would not be undertaken lightly, and would only be undertaken in the exceptional circumstances referred to in this section of the policy. Any decision to do this needs to be made with the Director or a trustee in the Director's absence and should not be taken alone by a volunteer or staff member. (For volunteers who are also trustees this decision must be made with the manager or another trustee in the manager's absence)
- If a situation occurs that means a worker may have to breach the service user's confidentiality, as far as is possible, the worker must inform the service user that they are going to do this and the reasons why.
- The following are occasions when a service user's confidentiality will be or may be breached:

Terrorism

It is the legal responsibility of all staff and volunteers to report acts or threats of terrorism to the police. Withholding information can lead to prosecution under The Prevention of Terrorism Act.

If a worker is given information relating to a terrorism threat, a previous act of terrorism, or a terrorism plan this information must be passed to the police. Switchboard's process for dealing with such a situation is as follows:

- You must remember and record immediately as much detail as possible about the conversation and the service user, for example, what was said, the service user's gender, approximate age, distinctive accent, background noise. For counsellors all information that is held in relation to the service user will need to be given to the police, i.e. identifiable information such as name, contact details, description and any other information that would help the police to identify them.
- You must immediately report what has happened and your concerns about terrorism to the Director, or in the Director's absence to a trustee. (For volunteers who are also trustees they must report to the Director or to another trustee in the Director's absence) This will enable the decision about what needs to happen next to be taken jointly so that no one person is carrying the responsibility without support.
- The Director or trustee must assess the situation with the person who has reported it and confirm whether or not there is a terrorism situation that needs reporting. If it is assessed as a terrorism situation the Director or trustee must report it to the police immediately.

Child protection

- Switchboard volunteers and staff have a duty to protect children and young people and therefore need to report to Switchboard's Director (can be done via the service manager) if they receive information that a child/young person is at risk of significant harm. This might include neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- If concern about a child or young person comes to the attention of a volunteer or staff member Switchboard's Child Protection policy must be implemented immediately to inform the correct procedure that the volunteer or staff member must follow.

Vulnerable adult protection.

- Switchboard volunteers and staff have a duty to protect vulnerable adults and therefore need to report to Switchboard's Director if they receive information that confirms that a vulnerable adult is at risk of significant harm. This might include neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- If concern about a vulnerable adult comes to the attention of a volunteer or staff member Switchboard's Vulnerable Adult policy must be implemented immediately to inform the correct procedure that the volunteer or staff member must follow.

Suicide or significant self harm

- Switchboard provides services to a range of people, some of whom are emotionally vulnerable and may harm themselves or experience suicidal thoughts and/or behaviours. Switchboard's aim is to listen and support people in distress which can be hugely beneficial to someone contemplating self harm or suicide. In some instances a service user may already have hurt themselves or attempted suicide and in such situations the welfare of the service user is the priority. It is therefore a responsibility of all volunteers and staff to encourage anybody who is at immediate risk of harm to seek the appropriate medical attention, either in the form of a physical or psychological intervention. For example, callers to the help-line who have hurt themselves in any way, or are about to, should be encouraged to call an ambulance, or provide their contact details and consent to enable the worker to call an ambulance on their behalf. Callers in a less urgent need of any intervention, for example if they are feeling suicidal, should be encouraged to seek additional support from their GP as soon as possible.
- If a service user has already taken suicidal or significant self harm action it is Switchboard's policy to do everything possible to get immediate emergency help to that service user *even if they have not given permission for you to do so*. For service users who are present in the building receiving face to face services such as counselling, this will entail calling an ambulance for the service user. For callers to the help-line it will be very difficult to get an ambulance to the service user unless they have given the details of where they are. Attempts should be made to encourage the service user to call an ambulance or provide these details so that an ambulance can be called for them.
- If the worker has been unable to obtain details of where the service user is a decision will need to be made about the possibility of contacting the police for assistance in tracing the call. In such a situation the worker should not have to make this decision alone and should therefore contact the manager or a trustee in the manager's absence to discuss the options and make decisions about what action should be taken. (For volunteers who are also trustees they must contact the manager or another trustee in the manager's absence)

Abusive homophobic and threatening calls

- The safety and welfare of Switchboard's staff and volunteers is paramount to the organisation, for this reason if a volunteer is intimidated, abused or threatened by a service user they have the right to report it to the police, and this right overrides the service user's right to confidentiality. Similarly, if abusive or threatening messages are left on the answer-phone, or are sent by email or post the police may be informed. As with all of the above situations when consideration is being given to breaching confidentiality the situation must be discussed with the Director or a trustee in the Director's absence as soon as

possible. (For volunteers who are also trustees they must discuss the situation with the Director or another trustee in the Director's absence)

Reviewed: July 2014