



Maintaining a professional boundary between police and members of the public

1. This guidance relates to professional relationships with members of the public and should be read in conjunction with the Code of Ethics. It is not intended to cover every situation but sets out the broad principles to support decision making and professionalism.
2. The guidance applies to police officers, special constables, police staff and police volunteers. It does not apply to relationships with colleagues in the police service or in agencies or bodies working with the police.
3. Police personnel must act ethically, professionally and appropriately and treat all individuals with whom they have contact with dignity and respect. The Code of Ethics states that officers/staff must not engage in sexual conduct or other inappropriate behaviour on duty and must not establish or pursue an improper sexual or emotional relationship with a person with whom they come into contact in the course of their work who may be vulnerable to an abuse of trust or power.
4. Failure to follow this guidance may contravene the Standards of Professional Behaviour and may constitute a criminal offence. There is no place in policing for those who abuse their position for sexual purposes.

A position of trust

5. The professional relationship between a member of the police service and the public depends on trust and confidence. Police personnel who display sexualised behaviour towards a member of the public who they have come into contact with through work, undermine the profession, breach trust, exploit a power imbalance, act unprofessionally and potentially commit a criminal act. Such behaviours also have the potential to reflect negatively on police colleagues and have an impact on the professional relationships they have with the communities they serve.

Interactions with members of the public involved in a current incident or investigation

6. Do not engage in, or pursue, a sexual or improper emotional relationship, on or off duty, with any member of the public who you have come into contact with during the course of your current work or duties.
7. While you may find yourself attracted to a member of the public, or find yourself in a situation where someone is attracted to you, it is your responsibility not to act on these feelings. This is to prevent any harm that such actions may cause and to maintain the integrity of the policing profession.

8. Inform a line manager as soon as is practicable if a member of the public attempts to pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with you, so that control measures can be put in place. Treat them politely and considerately and try to re-establish a professional boundary, in addition to informing your line manager. If their behaviour continues, discuss with your manager the most appropriate way for you to respectfully disengage from that individual while a policing response is still provided.
9. Do not use your professional relationship with a member of the public to pursue a relationship with someone close to them. For example, do not use visits to engage in or pursue a relationship with a member of the public's family member.
10. Do not end a professional relationship with a member of the public solely to engage in or pursue a personal relationship with them.

Relationships with members of the public where there was previous professional contact

11. Depending on the circumstances, developing a sexual or improper emotional relationship with a member of the public with whom you have had former professional contact may also amount to an abuse of your position. Factors that may be relevant when assessing whether the relationship would represent an abuse of position include:
 - degree of previous professional involvement
 - length of previous professional involvement
 - vulnerability of member of the public currently and when professional contact took place
 - period since cessation of professional contact.

Power imbalance

12. It is your responsibility to be aware of the imbalance of power between you as a member of a police service and members of the public you come into contact with through your work, and to maintain professional boundaries. While a sexual or improper emotional relationship with any member of the public met through work is likely to be a breach of this guidance, the breach will be aggravated where the member of the public is particularly vulnerable.

Examples of particular vulnerability may include:

- missing or suicidal people
 - domestic abuse victims
 - people with alcohol or drugs dependencies
 - young people
 - people who have been trafficked.
13. Do not use police systems to assess someone's background in order to check if a relationship would put you in breach of this guidance.

Communication

14. Use of (or providing) personal social media, email, telephone or contact details to contact a member of the public you meet during the course of current work or duties is usually inappropriate. Consider the potential risks involved in using personal social media and the impact that inappropriate use could have on the person's trust in you and in the policing profession. Follow force guidance on the wider use of social media and do not use work-based accounts, unless for professional reasons.

Help and advice

15. If you are not sure whether you are (or may be at risk of) abusing your professional position, seek advice from a line manager.

Responsibilities

16. If you are concerned that a colleague may be involved in inappropriate contact, there is a positive duty on you to report this matter. Reporting can be to a line manager, professional standards or other route as described in the College's Reporting Concerns guidance.
17. Supervisors and managers have a duty to ensure this guidance is followed and that appropriate action is taken where they become aware of any breach.
18. Where potential breaches of this guidance come to light, they are likely to require mandatory referral to the IPCC, in line with their referral criteria.

About the College

The College of Policing was established in 2012 as the professional body for everyone who works for the police service in England and Wales.

Our purpose is to provide those working in policing with the skills and knowledge necessary to prevent crime, protect the public and secure public trust.