

OP16 Safe Friendships and Relationships

1. Policy Statement

- 1.1 Shared Lives South West (SLSW) recognises the importance that friendships and relationships have to all of us. SLSW is committed to ensuring that people in SLSW placements have the same opportunity as any other member of the community to develop a range of valued friendships and relationships including intimate relationships.
- 1.2 One of the most important roles of a SLSW carer is to support the people placed with them to make friends, develop and keep relationships and maintain family links.
- 1.3 This policy outlines the responsibilities of both the carer and SLSW in relation to supporting people to access safe friendships and relationships
- 1.4 SLSW is also responsible for ensuring that SLSW carers understand the complex legislative framework within which they are working and their role in protecting individuals from exploitation and abuse.

2. General Principles

- 2.1 One of the keys aims of any SLSW placement is to support the person in the placement to live as ordinary a life as possible.
- 2.2 People supported in SLSW should be encouraged and given the opportunity to form friendships and relationships with a range of other people. These friendships and relationships will develop through their day-to-day contact with people in different settings.
- 2.3 The vulnerability of some of the individuals living in Shared Lives, means it is a responsibility on SLSW carers to try and ensure that these relationships are safe and free from possible exploitation. In order to achieve this, SLSW carers will be expected to be alert to any potential risks involved for the individual when seeing particular friends/family members and take steps to support the individual to minimise these risks.
- 2.4 This will often be done with close advice and guidance from the funding social care team of the individual who, wherever possible, should identify any risks in the individual's needs assessment/care and support plan. Agreed decisions regarding the management of these risks in the SLSW placement should be recorded in the care and support plan.

- 2.5 SLSW or the carer will not breach an individual's right to privacy and respect and should, where possible, involve the individual in considering the degree of risk their friendships and relationships could pose.
- 2.6 SLSW carers and social workers/case officers must ensure individuals have the information and guidance they need to make choices about their relationships. For example, a referral to the local IATT. However, even with this information some individuals may choose to have contact with friends and family about which carers may feel uncomfortable.

3. Legislative Context

- 3.1 People have the right to form a friendship with whomever they please. There are very few legal powers to prevent a friendship between an individual and another person. There is however legislation which both SLSW and the carers need to take account of which is intended to give greater protection to individuals from sexual exploitation and abuse.
- 3.2 Sex Offenders Act 2003, Human Rights Act 1998, Serious Crime Act 2015, Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and Equality Act 2010.
- 3.3 SLSW is committed to enabling individuals to have the opportunity to lead a real life and will support the right of individuals to make informed choices about their own lives. SLSW also recognises the vulnerability of SLSW carers in operating as 'lone workers'. SLSW will seek to provide the training and support needed to enable SLSW carers both to have 'safe' relationships with adults and to be competent in fulfilling the important SLSW carer role they have in supporting adults to be able to develop the friendships and relationships that will enable them to give and to be valued.
- 3.4 SLSW will encourage people being supported to approach the police proactively to ask about new partners, this is known as 'right to ask' in some cases Claire's Law can be used to request information.

4. Procedure

- 4.1 SLSW will ensure, through training and explanation that the SLSW carer understands their role in supporting the people placed with them to have friendships and relationships, and the complex legislative framework within which they are working.
- 4.2 SLSW will request that the individual care and support plan gives guidance to the SLSW carer on the support that they are expected to give to the person placed with them to enable them to maintain family links and have a range of friendships and relationships.

- 4.3 SLSW will ensure that the SLSW carer understands the steps that they should take if they have concerns about a relationship that the person placed with them has developed. These are:
- 4.4 The SLSW carer should talk to the person placed with them and explain their concerns. This is a difficult balancing act as the SLSW carer has a duty to protect the person placed with them from exploitation or abuse but must also bear in mind the right of the individual to have friendships and relationships of their choice. The SLSW carer should be careful not to put undue or unfair pressure on the person to end that relationship. The Human Rights Act 1998 protects the right to privacy and respect for family life, home and correspondence and to freedom of association with others.
- 4.5 If the SLSW carer continues to have concerns, they should explain that to the individual. The SLSW carer should discuss continuing concerns with the SLSW worker in order to understand their basis and agree a strategy.
- 4.6 The SLSW worker and carer should consult the local authority who may decide the matter should be properly considered at a formal review involving the individual and their representative. The meeting will consider the concerns and agree a way forward. This may involve a risk assessment and the agreement of a formal risk management strategy. The care and support plan should if necessary be amended so that the SLSW carer has clear instructions about their role and what they should be doing to support and safeguard.
- 4.7 If, at any time a SLSW carer is concerned that an individual is involved in an abusive friendship or relationship they should immediately inform the SLSW. SLSW will then follow the procedure for safeguarding and liaise with the local funding authority.

5. Review

- 5.1 This policy will be reviewed every two years, or earlier if required.

6. Responsibilities

- 6.1 The Registered Manager has overall responsibility for the implementation of this policy.