Outstanding Care,
Compassionate People,
Healthier Communities

NHS
Sherwood Forest Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK POLICY

POLICY

Reference	HR/0035		
Approving Body	Joint Staff Partnership Forum		
Date Approved	August 2026		
For publication to external SFH website	**Positive confirmation received from the approving body that the content does not risk the safety of patients or the public:**		
	YES	**NO**	**N/A**
	X		
Issue Date	August 2026		
Version	3		
Summary of Changes from Previous Version	New policy template Updated job titles		
Supersedes	2		
Document Category	Human Resources		
Consultation Undertaken	JSPF sub-group		
Date of Completion of Equality Impact Assessment	August 2026		
Date of Environmental Impact Assessment (if applicable)	N/A		
Legal and/or Accreditation Implications	None		
Target Audience	All staff		
Review Date	June 2029		
Sponsor (Position)	Chief People Officer		
Author (Position & Name)	People Services Lead		
Lead Division/ Directorate	Corporate		
Lead Specialty/ Service/ Department	Human Resources		
Position of Person able to provide Further Guidance/Information	People Services Lead		

Associated Documents/ Information	**Date Associated Documents/ Information was reviewed**
Template control	April 2024

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This policy provides information, advice and guidance to managers and employees regarding acceptable professional and personal boundaries involving personal relationships between employees and service users, as well as relationships between employees who may work together.

2.0 POLICY STATEMENT

Colleagues must not allow a personal relationship with another colleague to influence their conduct at work. Employees are expected to declare any personal relationships at work which may full under this policy.

This policy sets out the Trusts' expectations concerning personal and professional boundaries at work and the management of personal relationships at work.

The Trust does not take a wholly prohibitive approach to personal relationships at work as it is recognised that these are inevitable, as the Trust is a large, local employer. It is acknowledged that relationships of a non-professional nature may develop between people who work together.

It is also acknowledged that colleagues must establish a rapport with patients / service users, their relatives and carers; they are also responsible for establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between themselves and those who use the Trust services. It is essential that all interactions between patients / service user are viewed and maintained in terms of a professional relationship.

Specifically, this Policy aims;

- To provide clear guidance to employees and managers as to their responsibilities, to ensure that issues arising from, or involving personal relationships at work are dealt with promptly, sensitively and effectively.
- Avoid situations where there is a potential conflict of interest.
- To ensure that situations do not develop where other colleagues feel unable to speak openly and honestly, or feel that a personal relationship is having an adverse impact on their own employment or on patient care.
- To avoid the potential for abuse of patients.
- To avoid the potential for fraudulent activity.
- To facilitate and encourage the development of a culture where employees feel confident to declare personal relationships.

By adhering to this policy, colleagues with personal relationships at work are more able to protect themselves from potential criticism.

3.0 DEFINITIONS/ ABBREVIATIONS

For the purposes of this policy, a close personal relationship can be defined as a family, sexual or intimate relationship and includes;

- Spouses or partners
- Parents, including in-laws and step-parents.
- Children, including in-laws and step-children.
- Siblings, including step-siblings and half-siblings.
- Grandparents and grandchildren.
- Aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces and cousins, either by family or related in marriage / civil partnership.
- Separated or divorced people.
- Other personal and stable relationships, including co-habiting partners.
- Sexual / intimate relationships
- A business / commercial / financial relationship
- A close friend

A personal relationship can be with an existing or prospective employee, a volunteer, a contractor or supplier, a Non-Executive Director, Governor, or employee of a related organisation with whom an employee interacts regularly as a result of their employment.

The above definitions are examples of personal relationships which may give rise to conflicts of interest in the workplace. However, personal relationships are not restricted to these examples.

4.0 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Managers

- Will be responsible for ensuring that they are familiar with this policy and procedures contained within it.
- Are responsible for promoting a culture of openness and transparency regarding personal relationships at work.

Employees

- Will be individually responsible for ensuring that any personal relationship at work does not interfere with their duties and responsibilities, and does not give rise to a conflict of interest, abuse of power or more or less favourable treatment.
- Are asked to work positively with the Trust to accommodate any reasonable changes to their work arrangements that are required to avoid potential conflicts of interest through personal relationships at work.

People Directorate

- The People Directorate can provide support and guidance to employees and managers on the implementation and application of this policy.

5.0 APPROVAL

This policy document was approved at the Trusts' Joint Staff Partnership Forum.

6.0 DOCUMENT REQUIREMENTS

This policy applies to all employees of the Trust and in addition to; Non-Executive Directors, Governors, bank workers, locums, agency staff, volunteers, students, contractors and employees of other organisations that provide services to the Trust.

It also applies to job applicants in the recruitment process. Job applicants will be required to declare on their application form, any personal relationships which may cause a conflict of interest.

The Trust's approach to personal relationships at work.

In any large organisation it is likely that some colleagues will be related to one another, or develop personal relationships, and, if they are in a close working relationships in the same workplace, the potential for conflict between personal / family loyalty and work responsibilities may arise.

Most social and personal relationships at work need not present a difficulty, and can be entirely beneficial in that they promote good working relationships. However, it is recognised that there will be particular circumstances where the employees concerned will need to withdraw from certain decisions, or from undertaking certain roles, in order to protect themselves and the Trust from any possible criticism of unfair bias.

Whilst it is not the Trust's intention to infringe upon the private lives of it's employees, it does expect that all colleagues (another others identified above within the scope of this policy) should conduct themselves at all times in ways that are consistent with the Trust CARE values, and with fairness and impartiality. In particular the recruitment and selection, treatment, rostering, development and promotion of staff should be based solely on evidence and not be in any way affected by personal relationships at work.

Due to this, the Trust expects personal relationships, involving direct line management to be avoided where possible.

Where personal relationships occur between colleagues, it is the responsibility of both individuals to avoid an actual or potential conflicts of interest or favouritism.

Identifying and declaring a personal relationship at work

Employees should declare to their line manager any existing or new personal relationships they have which could fall within this policy. That is one which may give rise to an actual or potential conflict of interest, abuse of power or more or less favourable treatment.

The line manager will treat these matters in confidence, and in consultation with the employees concerned, find ways in which these potential conflicts can be avoided. It is recommended that discussions with the People Directorate take place to establish a suitable approach, considering the circumstances of each personal relationship.

In the interests of transparency, consideration should be given as to whether or not it would be beneficial to inform colleagues of the existence of the personal relationship. However, as a general rule, all declarations of personal relationships should be treated in confidence, unless all parties involved in the personal relationship agree to make it public.

If it is agreed that the personal relationship will be made public, this best way of doing this should be discussed. This discussion may involve the line manager, or those in the personal relationship informing others.

Declarations of personal relationships should be recorded in writing and placed on the employees personal file. It is recommended that any declaration is reviewed annually, or sooner, if circumstances change.

Colleagues who declare a personal relationship at work should be treated fairly, and not suffer any detriment.

Colleagues who are uncertain about whether they need to declare a personal relationships may discuss the matter in confidence with their line manager or a representative from the People Directorate. Generally, they will be advised to declare the relationship where there is likely to be any risk of a potential conflict of interest, abuse of power, or more, or less favourable treatment.

Where a personal relationship, or failure to comply with this policy (following investigation) results in an unfair advantage or disadvantage, favouritism or bias to any of the parties, the matter will be considered seriously by the Trust.

Personal relationships between employees where there is no line management relationship

This type of personal relationship at work does not itself, constitute a difficulty. However, employees are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner, and in line with the Trust CARE Values at all times.

A personal relationship, particularly between two employees working in the same team, or in close contact, may have an adverse effect on their own and/or their colleagues' work. This could include parties communicating confidential, sensitive information to each other, which is not a necessary part of their work; behaving in a way which may cause difficulty or embarrassment to others e.g. arguing in the workplace, ignoring, excluding or isolating colleagues; not communicating with each other as a result of a disagreement or the break-up of a relationship and inflexibility in working arrangements. Please note this list is not exhaustive.

In establishing whether there is a potential conflict of interest, managers may wish to consider the following;

- Are any employees likely to be made uncomfortable in their dealings with either employee, because of the existence of a known personal relationship?
- Is a personal relationship seen to offer advantage to an employee and disadvantage to another by them feeling excluded from the relationship?
- Is the relationship potentially interfering with the professional provision of Trust services?
- Is the relationship potentially having a negative effect on the workings of a team?

Where there is evidence that a conflict of interest, breach of confidentiality or unfair advantage / disadvantage may occur as a result of employees with personal relationships working within the same area, the manager to whom the personal relationship has been disclosed may wish to consider an alternative arrangement, e.g. a change in reporting arrangements, or duties within a team or one party being moved to another area of work or work location.

All such matters should be considered in confidence, in discussion with the employees in the personal relationship. Managers are recommended to speak with a representative from the People Directorate, prior to a discussion taking place. In all instances, any changes should be of equal status and with the agreement of the individuals affected.

Personal relationships at work involving line management, a supervisory role or a more senior position with direct influence on that work area

In order to avoid any actual or potential conflict of interest, abuse of power or favouritism, employees who are in a line management or supervisory role, or in a more senior position with direct influence on that work area, should not be involved in:

- The appraisal, promotion or discipline or any other management activity or process (such as rostering or approval of time off) involving an employee / with whom they have a personal relationship (whether declared or not).
- The authorisation of any financial payments/decisions relating to financial matters e.g. timesheets, fee payments, expense claims, salary changes or allocation of external funding for an employee with whom they have a personal relationship (whether declared or not). However, if the person is the budget holder, then they should see the financial transaction but had additional independent authorisation.

When agreement to alterations that would mitigate the risk of a conflict of interest, favouritism or an abuse of power cannot be reached, the parties involved in the personal relationship should be advised in writing that should any proven favouritism, disadvantage, abuse of power or bias result from the personal relationships, either between the parties or with other staff, the matter will be considered to be vary serious by the Trust, and the Trust Disciplinary Policy may be followed.

Employees who are in a line management or supervisory role, or in a more senior position with direct influence on that work area, should not normally be involved in any way in the recruitment, selection or appointment of any applicant with whom they have a personal relationship (whether declared or not).

Where it is not practical to remove a member of staff from the recruitment process, all panel members should be made aware of the personal relationship and every panel decision should be justified as fair and equitable, without bias or conflict of interest. On such occasions, the Recruitment Team should be approached to find a neutral, alternative panel member for the selection process.

Personal relationships with contractors

As required by the Conflict of Interest Policy, no special favour should be shown in the tendering process to business run by, or employing, friends, partners or relatives. If an employee is asked

to participate in the tendering process, for example, by providing expert advice, they should declare any such relationships and they will not form part of the tendering process or decision making.

A personal relationship between an employee and a contractor is not acceptable if it involves an abuse of the employee's position of trust, a breach of the standards of propriety expected in the post, a compromise of professional standards or a conflict of interest.

Job Evaluation / promotion / pay

Employees must not be involved in the authorisation or evaluation of any job description for another employee with whom they have a personal relationship and are expected to declare any such interest immediately if they are approached to participate in the job evaluation process. They should not be involved in any decisions relation to the promotion or pay of another employee with whom they have a personal relationship.

At the commencement of each job matching panel, a declaration of interest will be taken and recorded. Each panel member must declare any declarations of interest as a panel member.

Disciplinary / Dignity at Work / Grievance issues / Speaking Up

Employees should declare a potential conflict of interest as soon as they are approached to participate in such proceedings as either a witness, Investigating Officer or Case Manager.

Employees must not be (save potentially as a witness with the caveat of impartiality) involved in any investigation, hearing or other disciplinary / grievance / dignity at work or speaking up related decisions involving another employee with whom they have a personal relationship.

In situations where one employee in a personal relationship is subject to investigation under Trust procedures, consideration should be given to the temporary redeployment of the other party / parties in the personal relationship whilst the investigation takes place. This is to ensure that a thorough and fair investigation is possible and also to protect that employee from false accusations that they might be impeding the investigation.

Where issues arise that involve one employee in a personal relationship, any discussion will remain confidential to that employee. The other employee in a personal relationship may attend meetings to provide support, but may not intervene, speak on behalf of or represent the other party.

At the commencement of formal hearings / appeals, a "declaration of interest" will be taken, and recorded. Each witness will also be asked for such a declaration.

Recruitment and Selection

Job applicants, including internal applicants, are required to declare any relationships with Trust employees on their job application form.

If an employee is involved in a recruitment and selection process and realises that there is an application from someone with whom they have a personal relationship, they must declare an

interest to their line manager and withdraw from the process immediately. They must not be involved in any aspect of the recruitment process, including shortlisting, or selection.

At the commencement of every selection interview, a "declaration of interest" from the panel regarding the candidate should be taken and recorded.

Once appointed, if an employee is found to have failed to declare a personal relationship on their application form with an employee who was involved in the recruitment process, or with whom they now have a line management relationship, the Trust's Disciplinary Policy will be followed.

An employee who has a personal relationship with another should not act as a Trust referee for that person for both internal and external positions. However, they may act as a referee in a personal capacity, providing the reference make it clear that it is not a Trust reference.

Personal relationship breakdowns

If the personal relationship breaks down, all involved employees should ensure that no acts that could be interpreted as arguments or disagreements occur at work. Such employees are encouraged to discuss the situation with their line manager/s.

The employees should ensure that their personal relationship breakdown does not bring the reputation of the Trust into disrepute. An example of a breach of this would be if an employee deliberately damaged a former partner's property, even outside of working hours. Any other behaviour that could, or did lead to a prosecution by the police would fall into this category.

Employees are reminded that if they are suffering from emotional stress from a personal relationship breakdown (regardless of whether it was a personal relationship at work) they may access the Trust Occupational Health / or other wellbeing services for support.

Raising concerns about personal relationships at work

Any employee who feels that the personal relationship of other team members or colleagues is adversely affecting their employment, the functioning of the team or the provision of services is encouraged to share their concerns with their line manager or a more senior manager.

Where an employee is not comfortable with these options, they may consider raising their concerns with the People Directorate or with the Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

Alternatively they may formally raise matters under the Trust's policies, such as Grievance; Freedom to Speak Up: or NHS Counter Fraud.

This also applies to employees in a personal relationship who feel they are being disadvantaged because of that relationship.

Confidentiality and Transparency

The Trust wishes to encourage transparency with regard to personal relationships at work in order to protect those involved, colleagues and the Trust. Therefore, employees are asked to carefully consider the option of making such personal relationships public.

However, it is accepted that this is not always the preference of the parties involved. In those instances, wherever possible, confidentiality regarding the existence of the personal relationship will be maintained. However, should disclosure to other parties prove necessary then a disclosure will be made following consultation with the line manager, the employees concerned, the People Directorate and Information Governance.

If alternative working practices or patterns are to be implemented, then it may be necessary to inform other members of the team about these arrangements and the reasons for them.

Personal Relationships with Patients/Service Users

The Trust has a duty of care to all patients/service users. Employees must not engage in personal relationships with patients/service users that they have met as a result of their employment. Employees who are required to be registered with a statutory body are bound by their respective codes of conduct, which require clear professional boundaries to be maintained.

It is the responsibility of the employee to maintain each relationship within its own appropriate boundary. Employees may experience vulnerable patients disclosing intimate, sensitive or personal matters, which allow potential for these discussions to be misinterpreted. Employees are reminded to conduct themselves appropriately.

Employees must not use their position to cultivate a personal relationship with a patient, client or service user, and should not;

- Give or accept social invitations, including exchanging personal details
- Request, or accept friendships on social media platforms
- Ask for, or accept an invitation to meet with a patient, client or service user to engage in personal, social activity.
- Visit a patient, client or service users home unannounced or without an appointment, or if visiting their home is not part of the treatment plan or service normally provided, without prior consultation with the employee's manager. If an unannounced visit is clinically necessary, this should be documented.
- Engage in unnecessary communication, including asking questions of a personal nature that are not necessary for the service or care being provided.

These examples are for guidance only and is not an exhaustive list.

If an employee becomes subject to inappropriate comments or behaviours from a patient/service user, they must inform their line manager immediately.

In a large organisation, it is recognised that some employees may have pre-existing personal relationships with individuals who may at some point become patients/service users, for example relatives, friendships etc. If this occurs, the employee must inform their line manager immediately of this relationship.

If someone that an employee knows becomes a patient/service user, it is the employees responsibility to inform their line manager of this relationship. At this time, consideration will be given as to whether there any potential boundary conflicts.

Each case will be assessed individually and appropriate action will be taken. This action may include the patient being treated by another clinician, the placement of employee in an alternative ward/area for the duration of the patient's treatment etc. Please be aware this is not an exhaustive list and action appropriate to the situation and circumstances will be taken.

The employee must not access any patient records of those they share a close relationship with without approval from their line manager. This will be considered a non-authorised access to records and may result in action taken in line with the Trust's Disciplinary Policy. Further information can be found in the Trust's Information Governance Policy.

If an employee becomes concerned that a personal relationship is developing between a colleague and a patient/service user, they have a responsibility to inform their line manager or more senior manager.

Where an employee is not comfortable with these options, they may consider raising their concerns with the People Directorate or with a Freedom to Speak Up Guardian.

Alternatively they may formally raise matters under the Trust's policies, such as Grievance; Freedom to Speak Up or NHS Counter Fraud.

Breaches of policy

Where there is an alleged breach of this policy, the Trust Disciplinary Policy will be followed.

7.0 MONITORING COMPLIANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS

Minimum Requirement to be Monitored (WHAT – element of compliance or effectiveness within the document will be monitored)	Responsible Individual (WHO – is going to monitor this element)	Process for Monitoring e.g. Audit (HOW – will this element be monitored (method used))	Frequency of Monitoring (WHEN – will this element be monitored (frequency/ how often))	Responsible Individual or Committee/ Group for Review of Results (WHERE – Which individual/ committee or group will this be reported to, in what format (eg verbal, formal report etc) and by who)
Policy Implementation	Associate Director of People (Operations)	Audit	Quarterly	Joint Staff Partnership Forum

8.0 TRAINING AND IMPLEMENTATION

There are no specific training needs in relation to this policy, but Appointing Officers and Line Managers will need to be familiar with its contents as well as any other individual or group with a responsibility for implementing the contents of this policy.

As a Trust policy, all employees need to be aware of the key points that the policy covers. Employees can be made aware through a variety of means such as;

- Local Induction
- Team Brief
- One to one meetings / Supervision.

9.0 IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

- This document has been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment, see completed form at Appendix A
- This document is not subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment

10.0 EVIDENCE BASE (Relevant Legislation/ National Guidance) AND RELATED SFHFT DOCUMENTS

Evidence Base:

- Contract of Employment

Related SFHFT Documents:

1. Disciplinary Policy
2. Grievance Policy
3. Managing Work Related Stress Policy
4. Dignity at Work Policy
5. Conflict of Interest Policy

11.0 KEYWORDS

N/A

12.0 APPENDICES

- Equality Impact Assessment Appendix 1

APPENDIX 1 - EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT FORM (EQIA)

Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Form (Please complete all sections)

EIA Form Stage One:

Name EIA Assessor: Amber Hardy	**Date of EIA completion: 4 August 2026**
Department: People Directorate	**Division: Corporate**
Name of service/policy/procedure being reviewed or created: Personal Relationships at Work Policy	
Name of person responsible for service/policy/procedure: Amber Hardy	
Brief summary of policy, procedure or service being assessed: This policy provides information, advice and guidance to managers and employees regarding acceptable professional and personal boundaries involving personal relationships between employees and service users, as well as relationships between employees who may work together.	
Please state who this policy will affect: Staff,	

Protected Characteristic	Considering data and supporting information, could protected characteristic groups' face negative impact, barriers, or discrimination? For example, are there any known health inequality or access issues to consider? (Yes or No)	Provide a brief summary of what data or supporting information was considered to complete this assessment?
Race and Ethnicity	None	Consideration was given to the purpose and scope of the policy, its application to all employees, and any available workforce equality information, staff feedback, and organisational learning where applicable. The policy was assessed against all protected characteristics to identify any potential barriers or unintended discriminatory impacts. The assessment concluded that the policy applies consistently and fairly to all employees, does not disadvantage any protected group, and supports a respectful, inclusive, and professional working environment.
Sex	None	
Age	None	
Religion and Belief	None	
Disability	None	
Sexuality	None	
Pregnancy and Maternity	None	

Gender Reassignment	None	

Marriage and Civil Partnership	None	
Socio-Economic Factors (i.e. living in a poorer neighbour hood / social deprivation)	None	

If you have answered 'yes' to any of the above, please complete Stage 2 of the EIA on Page 3 and 4.

What consultation with protected characteristic groups including patient groups have you carried out?
As far as you are aware are there any Human Rights issues be taken into account such as arising from surveys, questionnaires, comments, concerns, complaints or compliments?

On the basis of the information/evidence/consideration so far, do you believe that the policy / practice / service / other will have a positive or negative adverse impact on equality? (delete as appropriate)						
Positive			**Negative**			
High	**Medium**	**Low**	**Nil**	**Low**	**Medium**	**High**
If you identified positive impact, please outline the details here:						

Protected Characteristic	**Please explain, using examples of evidence and data, what the impact of the Policy, Procedure or**	**What is already in place in the policy or its implementation to address any inequalities or barriers to access**	**Please outline any further actions to be taken to address and mitigate or remove any in barriers that have been identified.**

EIA Form Stage Two:

	group.	including under representation at clinics, screening.	
Race and Ethnicity			
Gender			
Age			
Religion			
Disability			
Sexuality			
Pregnancy and Maternity			
Gender Reassignment			
Marriage and Civil Partnership			
Socio-Economic Factors (i.e. living in a poorer neighbour hood / social deprivation)			

Signature: *I can confirm I have read the Trust's Guidance document on Equality Impact Assessments prior to completing this form*
Date: