



Forest Voluntary Action Forum (FVAF)

Confidentiality policy

1. General principles

FVAF recognises that staff, both employed and volunteer, gain information about individuals and organisations during the course of their work or activities. In most cases such information will not be stated as confidential and staff may have to exercise common sense and discretion in identifying whether information is expected to be confidential. This policy aims to give guidance but if in doubt, seek advice from your line manager.

Members of staff are able to share information with their colleagues in order to discuss issues, seek advice, and share work. However, this must always be done in ways which are respectful and which avoid “labelling” or “gossip”.

It is not appropriate to discuss a person’s sexuality (i.e. ‘outing’ a gay person) without their prior consent.

Staff should avoid talking about organisations or individuals in external settings, for example committees, forums or panels unless as a factual basis for discussion, or in social settings.

Staff will not disclose to anyone, other than their line manager, any information considered sensitive, personal, financial or private without the knowledge or consent of the individual, or in the case of an organisation, an officer.

There may be training or other settings where staff would want to discuss difficult situations to gain a wider perspective on how to approach a problem. If this involves other organisations, then consent must be sought. Alternatively, a discussion may take place with names or identifying information remaining confidential.

Staff should not promise confidentiality where a person discloses matters relating to child protection or the protection of vulnerable adults.

2. Why information is held

Most information held by FVAF relates to voluntary and community organisations, self-help groups, volunteers, employees and employers, trustees or services which support or fund them, hereafter known as service users

Information is kept to enable FVAF staff to understand the history and activities of organisations in order to deliver the most appropriate services.

FVAF has a role in putting people in touch with voluntary and community organisations and keeps contact details which are passed on to any enquirer, except where the group or organisation expressly requests that the details remain confidential.

Information about volunteers is given to known groups or statutory agencies which request volunteers, but is not disclosed to anyone else.

Information about ethnicity and disability of service users is kept for the purposes of monitoring our equal opportunities policy and also for reporting back to funders.

3. Access to information

Information is confidential to FVAF as an organisation and may be passed to staff, line managers or trustees to ensure the best quality for service users.

Where information is sensitive, i.e. it involves disputes or legal issues it will be confidential to the employee dealing with the case and their line manager. Such information should be clearly labelled 'Confidential' and should state the names of the staff entitled to access the information and the name of the individual or group who may request access to the information.

Service users may have sight of FVAF records held in their name or that of their organisation. The request must be in writing to the Manager giving 10 working days' notice and be signed by the individual, or in the case of an organisation's records, by their Chair or Chief Officer. Sensitive information as outlined in above paragraph will only be made available to the person or organisation named on the file.

Staff will not withhold information from their line manager unless it is purely personal.

Employees may have sight of their personnel records at any appropriate time and at a maximum of 7 days notice given in writing to the Manager.

When photocopying or working on confidential documents, staff must ensure they are not seen by people in passing. This also applies to information on computer screens.

4. Storing information

General non-confidential information about organisations is kept in unlocked filing cabinets with open access to all FVAF staff.

Information about volunteers and other individuals will be kept in lockable filing cabinets by the colleague directly responsible. These staff must ensure the Manager knows how to gain access.

Employees' personnel information will be kept in lockable filing cabinets and will be accessible to the Manager.

In an emergency situation, the Manager may authorise access to files by other people.

When there is no longer a need to keep sensitive information, this information will be destroyed, either by shredding or incineration, and not simply thrown out.

5. Duty to disclose information

Staff believing an illegal act has taken place or that a user is at risk of harming themselves or others, must report this to the Manager who will protect the source and report it to the appropriate authorities.

Service users should be informed of this disclosure

There is a legal duty to disclose certain illegal acts to the appropriate authorities (e.g. child abuse and abuse of vulnerable adults will be reported to the appropriate local authority department).

6. Disclosures

FVAF complies fully with the Disclosure and Barring Service Code of Practice regarding the correct handling, use, storage, retention and disposal of Disclosures and Disclosure information.

Disclosure information is always kept separately from an applicant's personnel file in secure storage with access limited to those who are entitled to see it as part of their duties. It is a **criminal offence** to pass this information to anyone who is not entitled to receive it.

Documents will be kept for six months and then destroyed by secure means. Photocopies will not be kept. However, FVAF may keep a record of the date of issue of a Disclosure, the name of the subject, the type of Disclosure requested, the position for which the Disclosure was requested, the unique reference number of the Disclosure and the details of the recruitment decision taken.

7. Data Protection Act

See separate data protection, handling and management policy

8. Breach of confidentiality

Employees who are dissatisfied with the conduct or actions of other staff or FVAF should raise this with their line manager using the grievance procedure, if necessary, and not discuss their dissatisfaction outside FVAF.

Staff accessing unauthorised files or breaching confidentiality may face disciplinary action. Ex-employees breaching confidentiality may face legal action.

9. Whistleblowing

Where the Manager has concerns about the use of FVAF funds, this may be referred directly to the Chair or Treasurer outside the usual grievance procedure.

Employees who are concerned about wrongdoings within the organisation are encouraged to raise their concerns internally with the Manager. The Whistleblowers Act (July 1999) allows external disclosure (for instance to police or media) as long as there are good reasons (which are detailed by the Act) for doing so.