

THE HORIZONS PROJECT
PUBLICATION SERIES
HP-006

Professional Boundaries

Knowing where our responsibility begins, and where it ends.

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About This Publication

Every profession has boundaries. They are not barriers to helping people; they are what make safe, ethical and trustworthy practice possible. The Horizons Project is no different.

Earlier publications have introduced Momentum and the role of Momentum Support Sessions. This publication moves from the structure of those sessions into the professional responsibility that makes them safe, ethical and collaborative.

Why do professional boundaries matter, and how do they protect good Momentum practice? That question sits at the centre of safe, ethical and collaborative work.

This publication explores professional boundaries through five linked ideas: knowing the Horizons role, respecting specialist expertise, recognising the edge of competence, handling responsibility carefully and maintaining compassion without overstepping.

Knowing Our Place

There is a temptation, particularly when someone is distressed, to believe that helping means solving every problem placed in front of us. It is an understandable instinct; when another human being is struggling, few people want to respond by saying, “That isn’t my role.”

Yet experience teaches something important: trying to do everything often results in doing nothing particularly well.

The Horizons Project was not created to replace counselling, healthcare, housing, legal advice or statutory services. It occupies a specific place within a wider network of support.

Knowing that place is not a limitation. It is one of our greatest strengths, because when we understand our own role, we are far more likely to respect the roles of others.

Every Profession Has Its Expertise

Imagine a bridge being built. Architects design it, engineers calculate the loads, construction teams assemble it and inspectors ensure it is safe. Each profession contributes something essential, and none attempts to replace the others.

Support within our communities works in much the same way. Counsellors bring therapeutic expertise, housing officers understand housing law and policy, recovery practitioners draw upon specialist knowledge of addiction and recovery, healthcare professionals diagnose and treat medical conditions, and probation practitioners manage legal responsibilities that cannot be delegated elsewhere.

Momentum Support Sessions were never intended to absorb those roles. Instead, they exist to help people remain connected to them.

The strongest support networks are rarely created when one organisation does everything. They are created when each organisation does its own job exceptionally well while respecting the expertise of everyone else.

The Confidence to Say "I Don't Know"

There is a quiet professionalism in admitting when something falls outside your expertise. In everyday life, people sometimes feel pressure to have an answer for everything, but professional practice demands something different.

Sometimes the safest response is, “I don’t know, but I know who might.” That sentence is not a failure; it is often one of the most responsible things a practitioner can say.

Horizons would rather help someone reach the right expert than offer reassurance built upon uncertainty. The purpose of Momentum is not to become the source of every answer, but to help people stay connected to those who already have the knowledge, authority and responsibility to provide them.

What Boundaries Look Like in Practice

A professional boundary is often visible in the small choices made during a conversation. It may mean listening carefully without giving advice that belongs to another profession, or saying clearly and respectfully, “That sounds important, but it needs the right person involved.”

It may mean helping someone prepare questions for a specialist rather than trying to become that specialist.

The edge of competence is usually reached when a conversation requires diagnosis, formal advice, legal interpretation, clinical judgement, statutory decision-making or risk management beyond the Horizons role.

At that point, responsibility is not dropped. It is handled carefully by explaining the boundary, identifying the appropriate next source of support and helping the person move towards it with confidence.

Horizons in Practice

David arrives frustrated after receiving a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions. He wants to know whether the decision is legally correct, but during the conversation it quickly becomes clear that the issue involves legislation and formal rights of appeal.

Rather than attempting to interpret the law, the boundary is named calmly and clearly. David is not told to go away and find help elsewhere. Instead, the conversation focuses on what he already understands, what he needs to ask and which organisation is best placed to advise him.

Together, they prepare for that next conversation, including the points David wants to raise and any information he may need to have ready. Responsibility is handled carefully: Horizons stays within its role while helping David reach the person or service with the right authority.

David leaves with a clearer understanding of the next step and greater confidence to contact the appropriate service. Horizons has not provided legal advice; it has helped David engage more effectively with the people who can.

Sometimes the most valuable support lies not in providing the answer, but in helping someone ask the right question.

Boundaries Build Trust

People sometimes assume that boundaries reduce compassion. In practice, clear boundaries often increase trust because they help individuals understand what Horizons can offer, what it cannot offer and why that distinction exists.

That honesty makes support feel more dependable, not less caring. Professionals know their expertise will be respected rather than replaced, partner organisations know their responsibilities will not be duplicated or confused, and individuals are not encouraged to depend on one organisation for every answer.

Clear boundaries protect everyone. They protect individuals from advice beyond our competence, professionals from duplication and role confusion, partner organisations from blurred responsibilities, and the integrity of the relationships that make collaborative working possible.

Walking Beside, Not Walking Ahead

There is a difference between leading somebody's life and accompanying them through part of it. Momentum has always chosen the second path.

The aim is not to make decisions for people or persuade them towards particular choices. Instead, we seek to create conversations in which people feel able to think more clearly, prepare more confidently and engage more effectively with the support around them.

The direction remains theirs. The decisions remain theirs. Our role is simply to walk alongside for a while.

Boundaries Are Not Fixed Walls

Although professional boundaries must remain clear, they should never become cold. There is a difference between maintaining appropriate boundaries and becoming emotionally distant.

People deserve kindness, respect and the experience of being listened to. None of those qualities weakens professional boundaries; if anything, they strengthen them.

The challenge is not to care less, but to care responsibly. That means recognising when encouragement is appropriate, when another professional should become involved and when the greatest act of support is helping someone reconnect with the wider network already around them.

Looking Ahead

Professional boundaries explain where our responsibility begins and where it ends. They also explain what should happen when the right response is to involve someone else.

The next publication explores what happens when concerns about safety mean responsibility can no longer remain with one person or one organisation alone.

That movement from professional boundaries to safeguarding is essential to keeping Momentum compassionate, ethical and accountable.

An Invitation

The Horizons Project does not believe that trust is created by promising everything. Trust is created by being honest about what can be offered, what cannot and why that distinction matters.

Professional boundaries are not obstacles to good support; they are part of good support.

They remind us that helping people well is rarely about becoming indispensable. More often, it is about helping them build confidence in themselves and in the wider network of people committed to supporting them.

That has always been the purpose of Horizons.

Continue Exploring

Continue exploring with the next publication.

HP-007 — Safeguarding and Shared Responsibility

This publication explores how The Horizons Project approaches safeguarding, duty of care and shared responsibility while remaining within its non-clinical role.

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