



## Helpline and Information Provision Policy

<i>Developed by: Aspire</i>	<i>Date:</i>
<i>Approved by: Board of Directors</i>	<i>Date:</i>
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## 1. Introduction

Aspire- The Asperger Syndrome Association of Ireland was founded in 1995 to provide support and information to people with Asperger Syndrome and their families.

### 1.1 Vision, mission and values

Aspire envisions a world where people with Asperger Syndrome have the same opportunities to work, socialise and participate as everyone else. Our mission is to provide supports to people with Asperger Syndrome that will help them to fulfil their goals, to provide information to them and their families, and to promote an understanding in the community.

Our values are:

#### **Inclusion**

We, in Aspire, believe that people with Asperger Syndrome have an invaluable insight and should be central to decisions regarding what supports are required and how our message is communicated.

#### **Equality**

Aspire believes that people with Asperger Syndrome have the right to access the same supports, community resources and educational and employment opportunities as everyone else.

#### **Promote Understanding**

We believe that a greater understanding of Asperger Syndrome in the community will lead to greater inclusion and awareness of the unique contribution that people with Asperger Syndrome can make.

#### **Achieving Aspirations**

People with Asperger Syndrome have the right to choose their own path and Aspire is committed to providing support to service users and promoting a level of understanding that will make it easier to achieve this.

### 1.2 Asperger Syndrome

Asperger Syndrome is a condition on the Autism Spectrum which impacts on the way that service users view the world, interact with and communicate with others.

While people who have Asperger Syndrome can have many talents and unique skills, they can experience challenges in forming relationships with others, managing anxiety, social exclusion and limited employment opportunities. Perhaps the most significant challenge is the 'hidden' element of the condition, which can make it difficult for others to understand the impact that Asperger Syndrome can have.

The characteristics of Asperger Syndrome vary from service user to service user but listed below are some examples of behaviours seen with service users with Asperger Syndrome:

- Sensitivity to stimuli such as light, heat, smell, touch and sound
- Literal interpretation of language resulting in comprehension difficulties
- Difficulty adapting to changes and understanding social expectations

- Difficulty with social interaction
- May have difficulty reading facial expressions and body language of other people
- May have difficulty making eye contact with others
- Often have a special interest which can often consume great deals of time

## 2. Purpose and Scope

A core objective of Aspire is to provide information to people with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and their families.

Queries can be made through:

- The Helpline Service
- Email
- Social Media Messaging
- Text
- Face to face meetings
- Conferences and fairs

(This list is not exhaustive).

Information is provided by phone, email or social media in an effort to address queries. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that procedures and guidelines are in place for staff to provide a quality service that adheres to best practice and ensures their safety and wellbeing.

The policy and its procedures applies to staff and volunteers who receive queries and provide information to individuals and families across all of Aspire services, in particular the Aspire Helpline Service.

For the purposes of this policy, individuals and families who engage with Aspire to seek information through the means outlined above will be referred to as 'service users'.

## 3. Procedures

### 3.1 Confidentiality and Data Protection

Trust between Aspire and the people who engage with its services is paramount and confidentiality is extremely important. Aspire is also required to adhere to current legislation governing data protection.

The helpline is a confidential service and callers can opt to remain anonymous if they wish. However, queries are directed towards the service, not individual staff members, and staff can refer the query to another staff member who may be better equipped to deal with it, if necessary. Staff must inform service users of their intent to do so.

### **3.1.1 Disclosure of Information**

Staff must not disclose information about the service user or the nature of their query to anybody outside the head office team, with the exception of the following circumstances:

- As ordered by the Gardaí, or army personnel
- For the purpose of investigating an offence
- To protect the state's international relations
- To prevent urgent injury or damage to person or property
- Under a court order or other rule of law
- Required for the purposes of obtaining legal advice or for legal proceedings in which the person making the disclosure is a party or a witness
- Made at the request of and with the consent of the subject of the data

### **3.1.2 Retention of Information**

Personal information, such as contact details, can be collected for the purposes of addressing queries. Such information must be voluntarily provided by the service user for that specific purpose. Once the query has been addressed, the information collected is deleted and not used for any other purpose.

Further information regarding data protection is available in the Aspire Data Protection Policy.

## **3.2 Dealing with Difficult Interactions**

Due to the nature of the service Aspire provides, staff can come into contact with service users who are in distressing situations. These service users can become frustrated and aggressive, and this can manifest through inappropriate behaviour towards staff. Staff are expected to conduct themselves in a professional manner while dealing with such service users, but their safety and wellbeing is of paramount importance during such an interaction. Staff are not permitted to meet with service users alone to provide information and support, all meetings must take place in the Aspire head office with the CEO/other staff present.

### **3.2.1 Difficult Interactions by Phone**

The procedure for staff dealing with an service user who is acting inappropriately by phone is:

1. Listen calmly to the service user and make it known that their concerns/queries are being heard.
2. Inform the service user that their behaviour is making staff uncomfortable and request that they adapt it (i.e. speak in a lowered tone).
3. If the service user continues to act in an inappropriate manner, staff must end the interaction. They can inform the service user why they are doing so, and direct them to the CEO to deal with their query when they feel calmer.

4. Staff must inform the CEO of the incident, who may wish to fill out an incident report form. The CEO will take steps to ensure that staff are supported to deal with the interaction.

### **3.2.2 Difficult Face to Face Interactions**

If an interaction of such nature takes place in a face to face capacity, staff must ensure that they are safe from physical and emotional harm. Staff must:

1. Not engage with the service user at all once they become aggressive. They can inform the service user that they are not comfortable and walk away from them to a safe location.
2. Engage An Garda Siochana if the service user attempts to continue the aggressive interaction.
3. Follow the advice of An Garda Siochana regarding their options if they wish to take the incident further.
4. Inform the CEO immediately.

These procedures will be reviewed annually and amended if required in order to adhere to best practise and ensure that the wellbeing of staff is maintained.

### **3.3 Boundaries**

It is typical for service users to engage with Aspire for the purpose of seeking information and support on a long term basis. Service users can build trust and working relationships with staff during this time. It is important for staff to establish professional boundaries with service users they work with. Staff must never:

- Provide their personal contact details to service users
- Meet with service users outside of office hours for the purposes of providing information
- Meet with service users without being accompanied by another staff member, with the exception of key working duties in the Residential Service. In this instance, staff must still make every effort to maintain boundaries with the service user.
- Encourage service users to drop into the office without a prior appointment

Social media is a complex issue regarding boundaries and staff are responsible for what information they make available to service users through it. Staff are encouraged to be responsible and not connect with service users with whom they are not familiar with.

Staff must clearly outline these boundaries to service users who seek to breach them, and inform the CEO of any incidents that may arise.

### **3.4 Recommendations**

Services for people with AS and their families can be limited and Aspire has compiled a directory of services who provide support to people with Asperger Syndrome and their families. This directory is for informational purposes only and Aspire does not recommend or endorse any of these services. Staff must never recommend or imply that they would recommend any of these services to services users while providing them with

information. Aspire cannot comment on the suitability of outside services to address individual and unique needs. Staff can inform service users of the purpose of the service and suggest they contact that service directly to find out more.

### 3.5 Dealing with Complaints

As per the Aspire Complaints Policy, complaints can be made to any member of staff. The helpline, email and members meetings are the most accessible way for service users to reach the organisation, and these means may be used by service users to make complaints. Staff are required to be aware of the process so they can advise service users of the correct procedure to use.

A complaint can be made in a number of ways:

- In person
  - By telephone
  - By letter
  - By email
- A complaint can be made to any staff member, manager or board member of Aspire.
  - If a complaint is being made about a particular person and the person's name is being given, the complaint must be written, giving details such as dates and locations so that the person dealing with the complaint can check the facts of the complaint
  - A complaint must be made within 12 months of the date of the event concerned, or within 12 months of becoming aware of the event.

A summary of the Complaints Policy is available for staff to provide to service users and outlines the process and contact details for relevant people that complaints can be made to.

### 3.6 Threats of suicide

Challenges with mental health can be a common issue for service users of Aspire and staff may encounter threats of suicide through the Helpline or other information provision services.

The procedures below outline reasonable steps that staff can take to encourage service users not to hurt themselves or end their lives. **The most appropriate response is to refer the situation to professionals who are trained to deal with such an incident.**

If a service user threatens suicide over the Helpline, there are a number of steps that staff can take to ensure that the service user gains the right support and that staff wellbeing is maintained:

1. Staff can ask the service user if they have made plans to hurt themselves.

2. If so, or if the service user indicates that they may hurt themselves, staff must encourage them to seek the appropriate help. This can be done in a number of ways:
  - Provide them with the name and number of a counsellor on the Directory of Services
  - Provide them with the number for The Samaritans
  - Offer to arrange an emergency appointment for them
  - If the service user feels they are in immediate danger or have already harmed themselves, encourage them to call an ambulance
  - If staff have contact details for the service user and feel that they are in immediate danger, emergency services (police/ambulance) can be contacted on their behalf. Staff can also provide the contact number of the service user, if available, to the Samaritans and refer the situation on to them.
3. Staff must inform the CEO immediately of the incident and support will be offered if required.

If a service user threatens suicide by email, text, social media messaging or a face to face meeting, the same process can be followed.

If the contact is face to face:

- An ambulance can be called to the location that they are at if staff feel that the service user is in immediate danger or has already harmed themselves.
- Staff must enlist the support of another staff member and both must stay with the service user until the ambulance arrives.
- If the service user leaves the premises with the threat of harming themselves, staff can contact An Garda Siochana and inform them where the service user is going.
- In the above circumstance, staff can follow the service user, if safe to do so, to confirm their location to An Garda Siochana, but must not physically contact them.

#### **4. Persons responsible for implementation**

The CEO is responsible for communicating the policy and its procedures to all staff who provide information to the public.

Staff are responsible for understanding and adhering to the procedures, and for bringing any issues that arise as a result to the CEO.



**Actions taken to manage incident**

**Actions taken to ensure incident does not re-occur**

<p>Incident reported to (please tick all that apply)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> On-call</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Service Manager</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Garda</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Medical Professional</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> HSE</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> HIQA</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please Specify)</p>
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Signed (Staff/Volunteer who witnessed/was involved in incident)

Signed (Manager)

Date: