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Quality Assurance Policies & Procedures

COMPLAINTS

1 Overview

The College aims to provide high quality services that meet the needs of all its clients. The College would hope that any complaint could be dealt with, at the source, by discussion between the student/complainant and member of staff. However, in the event of a service failing to meet a complainant's expectations, then the College offers a mechanism to resolve any complaints.

2 Commitment

The College is committed to providing outstanding services in accordance with published policy and procedures. It is equally committed to investigating and, where necessary, learning from any issues brought to the attention of the College relating to its operation.

3 Access to the Complaints Procedure

The College publicises its procedures relating to 'Comments, Compliments and Complaints' in a notice at reception, on the College website and in the College Student Handbook. A guide to the complaints procedure will be made available on request (Appendix 1). Any member of staff of Student Services will assist any user of the College in the process of lodging a complaint.

4 Confidentiality and Fair Treatment

4.1 All complaints will be treated with due consideration of confidentiality in relation to students or other complainant. A copy or the substance of the complaint will be circulated to the individuals who are the subject of a complaint except in extreme cases where this may be delayed for safeguarding or legal reasons.

4.2 All staff and students who become aware of the details of a complaint are required to keep this information confidential except for the purposes of investigation and response to the complaint until the complaint is resolved. Failure to do so may result in student or staff disciplinary action.

4.3 Nobody bringing a complaint under this procedure, successfully or otherwise, shall be treated less favourably by any member of staff than if the complaint had not been brought. Staff who contravene this requirement may be subject to disciplinary action. Complainants and staff will be expected to continue their

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relationship in a professional manner throughout the investigation of a complaint.

- 4.4 Anonymous complaints will not be dealt with unless the Vice Principal considers that a risk to the public exists.

5 Recording and Learning from Complaints

The Vice Principal will document and compile records of complaints. A summary of complaints and outcomes together with action for improvement, if necessary, will be presented periodically for consideration and action by the Curriculum Leadership Committee.

6 Procedure for Informally Resolving the Complaint at the Source

- 6.1 Anyone who has cause for complaint should discuss their issue with the member of staff who is delivering the service in question. The member of staff should try all means to resolve the complaint to the complainant's satisfaction.
- 6.2 If this process fails to resolve the issue, then the complainant should contact the Head of School/Division responsible for the service. Any member of staff will assist in making contact with the appropriate Head of School/Division. The Head of School/Division will use all means to find a satisfactory resolution to the complaint.

7 Formal Complaints Procedure

7.1 Stage 1: Resolving the Complaint via the Vice Principal

The aggrieved party should make a formal complaint in writing, by phone or in person, via the Principal's PA. These details will be passed to the Vice Principal who will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within five working days. The Vice Principal will give a full written answer to the complaint within 15 working days of making the formal complaint. If it is going to take longer than 15 days, then he/she will inform the complainant as to when he/she can expect a reply. If the complaint is of a serious nature affecting welfare the complaint will be resolved as soon as possible.

7.2 Stage 2: Resolving the Complaint Through the Principal's Office

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, then a request can be made to have the complaint reviewed. A request for a review should be made, in writing, to the Vice Principal. The review process requires the Principal to look at all the information connected with the complaint. He/she will decide whether or not the complaint should be considered by the Complaints Panel.

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If the Principal decides that a Complaints Panel is not necessary, he/she will write to the complainant within ten working days of the receipt of the request for review explaining the result of the review and give clear reasons for the decision reached. This letter will constitute a 'Completion of Procedure Letter' in relation to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, for complaints relating to Higher Education students unless the complaint is further pursued through an awarding University's complaints procedure as indicated in 7.3.

If the Principal convenes the Complaints Panel it will comprise the Principal, Vice Principal, a representative of the School/Division about which the complaint has been made, the complainant and a friend, parent or supporter if requested. The complainant will, within fifteen days of the receipt of the request for review, be invited to a meeting to discuss why he/she is still dissatisfied with the way the complaint has been dealt with. A record of this meeting shall be kept should arbitration be sought. The College subsequently will write to the complainant within five working days of the date of the Complaints Panel meeting to notify them of the result of the review and give clear reasons for the decision reached. This letter will constitute a 'Completion of Procedure Letter' in relation to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, for complaints relating to Higher Education students unless the complaint is further pursued through an awarding University's complaints procedure as indicated in 7.3.

7.3 **Stage 3: Resolving the Complaint Through Independent Arbitration**

Every effort will be made to find a solution to the complaint. If the previous stages still result in failure to resolve the issue, the College may appoint an adviser to make an independent investigation of the case within ten working days of the appeal for arbitration. This will be normally carried out by the College's solicitor who will define the timescale of arbitration depending on the complexity of the complaint. This process will not usually begin until all the previous stages of the complaints procedures have been exhausted.

In the case of complaints relating to Higher Education students, the complaint may be referred, within ten working days of the appeal for arbitration, to the awarding University at stage two of their complaints procedure or to other relevant awarding organisation and subsequently to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator if the complaint cannot be resolved by the awarding organisation. Applications to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education must be made within three months of the date of the 'Letter of Completion'. Details are available at <http://www.oiahe.org.uk>.

The decision of independent arbitration is final.

7.4 For clarity, **Appendix 2 – Complaint Resolution Flowchart** summarises the complaint procedure to comply with OIA requirements.

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8 Formal Procedure for complaints against the Principal

- 8.1 The nature of the complaint will be investigated by a senior and impartial officer from the College. At this juncture the precise concerns and the specific redress which is intended by way of an outcome from the formal complaints process will be examined. The investigation will be completed in 15 working days from the first meeting with the complainant and the investigating officer. If this is not possible, the investigating officer will communicate this to the complainant. The complainant will be able to be supported by another person during this part of the process.
- 8.2 An impartial member of the Governing Body, excluding the Chair, will be appointed to determine the formal complaint following investigation. Following the investigation and determination of the formal complaint, the Governor will inform the complainant of their decision and the complaint outcome and the reasons for it. It is anticipated that the timescale for determination of the formal complaint would be approximately 15 working days from the completion of the investigation report.
- 8.3 If the complainant is dissatisfied with the decision reached on the formal complaint, the complainant would be entitled to request an appeal on one or more of the following grounds, that:
- there was a procedural irregularity in the process followed in dealing with the formal complaint;
 - the decision reached on the formal complaint was unreasonable; and/or
 - new material evidence was available that was not previously reasonably available.
- 8.4 If the complainant wishes to request an appeal on one or more of these grounds, this needs to be completed by informing the Head of Governance in writing within 15 working days of the date of the decision letter explaining the grounds on which the appeal is requested. Where the complainant had valid grounds for appeal, the appeal would be carried out by way of a review on the papers and would not constitute a reinvestigation of the formal complaint. The appeal would be carried out by the Governing Body's Appeals Panel. The complainant would receive a decision letter explaining whether the appeal was upheld or rejected in whole or in part and any relevant redress to be afforded. The appeal decision would be final and the formal complaints procedure would then have been exhausted.

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Appendix 1

Comments, Compliments and Complaints

Hartlepool College of Further Education aims to provide high quality services that meet the needs of all its clients. We want to make our services as efficient and effective as possible. To do this we need to know whether we're getting it right and how we can improve services for you.

- If you are not satisfied with a service, tell us why not and what we can do to improve things.
- If we are doing things really well, we'd like to hear about that too.
- And we'd be interested to hear any suggestions you have for making our service even better.

We promise to listen carefully to what you have to say and respond promptly to your comments and complaints. Any information you provide will be treated confidentially.

How do I make a complaint?

Trying to sort it out

First of all, talk to the staff who run the service you are concerned about. Contact the School/Division you have been dealing with or ring reception (01429 295111) and they will put you through to the right School/Division. The person you contact will do all they can to sort out your problem as quickly as possible. You can complain for yourself or on behalf of someone who cannot complain for himself or herself.

What if I'm still dissatisfied?

Making a formal complaint

If you are dissatisfied with how your complaint has been dealt with you can take it further by making a **formal complaint**. You can make a formal complaint in writing, by phone or in person, via the Principal's PA who will take down the details of your complaint.

Who do I write to?

You should make your complaint direct to Principal's PA, Hartlepool College of Further Education, Stockton Street, Hartlepool TS24 7NT, alternatively complaints@hartlepoolfe.ac.uk.

What happens next?

Your complaint will be investigated by a Vice Principal, who will write to you within five working days and let you know who is dealing with your complaint and how long it will take. We will aim to give you a full written answer to your complaint within 15 working days of making your formal complaint. If it is going to take us longer than 15 days, we will let you know when you can expect a reply.

Can I take my complaint further?

Review by the Principal

If you are still dissatisfied with how your complaint has been handled, you can ask to have your complaint reviewed. If you ask for a review, the Principal will look at all the information connected with your complaint. He/she will decide whether or not your complaint should be considered by the Complaints Panel. The Complaints Panel will comprise the Principal, Vice Principal, a representative of the School/Division about which the complaint has been made, yourself and a friend, parent or supporter if you wish. If it is decided that a Complaints Panel should be held, you will be invited to a meeting to discuss why you are still dissatisfied with the way your complaint has been dealt with. If you wish to have your complaint reviewed, you should write to the Vice Principal.

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Appeal

We will make every effort to deal with your complaint to your satisfaction. If we are not able to do this, the College will appoint an adviser to make an independent investigation of your case, presently the College's solicitor. However, this process does not usually begin until the College's own complaints procedures have been completed. In the case of complaints relating to Higher Education students, the complaint may be referred to the awarding University at stage two of their complaints procedure and subsequently to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator if the complaint cannot be resolved by the University. If your complaint concerns examinations or assessments, and you remain dissatisfied after exhausting internal processes, it may be escalated to the relevant regulator or exam board for further consideration.

It is always best to first of all contact the staff responsible for the service you are unhappy about. They will do their best to sort out your problem.