

# Complaints, Suggestions and Compliments Handling Policy & Procedure

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This policy has been reviewed in line with the Equality Act 2010 which recognises the following categories of individual as Protected Characteristics: Age, Gender Reassignment, Marriage and Civil Partnership, Pregnancy and Maternity, Race, Religion and Belief, Sex (gender), Sexual orientation and Disability. We will continue to monitor this policy and to ensure that it has equal access and does not discriminate against anyone, especially any person/s listed under any protected characteristic.

# **COMPLAINTS, SUGGESTIONS AND COMPLIMENTS HANDLING POLICY AND PROCEDURE**

## **1. PRINCIPLES**

- 1.1 The Bedford College Group (TBCG) recognises the importance of listening and collecting feedback from students, customers, employers and other stakeholders so that it can continually improve the quality of its services. The purpose of this policy is to outline a clear and consistent model for managing complaints, suggestions and compliments so that good practice can be celebrated, poor service encounters quickly addressed and suggestions and learnings built into a cycle of continuous improvement.
- 1.2 This policy is drawn up in line with TBCG's values of valuing teamwork, improving continuously, student centred, inclusive, open and caring, and nurturing educational excellence.
- 1.3 This policy applies to TBCG and all of its colleges and centre, including Bedford College, Central Bedfordshire College, National College for Motorsport, Shuttleworth College, The Bedford Sixth Form, The Corby Sixth Form, The Learning Centres and Tresham College. It does not apply to Bedford College Services Limited (BCS) which is managed as independent organisation and has its own feedback and complaints policy.

## **2. POLICY STATEMENT**

- 2.1 TBCG is committed to being an outstanding provider of education and training, challenging ourselves to continually improve so that we provide the very best service to our students, customers, employers and wider community. We welcome feedback on all aspects of our service so that we can maintain what is working well and address any areas that don't yet meet stakeholders' expectations. As such, TBCG will provide a formal complaints, suggestions and compliments process which:
  - Is equally and easily accessible to all of our students, customers, employers and stakeholders
  - Is handled in a fair and consistent manner which allows for speedy handling and resolution, following a set procedure and timeframes
  - Respects the sensitive manner of some feedback and people's desire for confidentiality
  - Keeps people informed of progress
  - Provides information to departments so that services and the student experience can be improved.

## **3. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK**

This policy takes into account the following frameworks and guidance:

- The government's guidance relating to complaints about a further education college or apprenticeship provider

- ESFA guidance on complaints about post-16 education and training provision funded by the ESFA
- The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) good practice framework for handling complaints
- Consumer Protection Law which sets out a framework for the managing of complaints for higher education students.

#### **4. WHO CAN MAKE A COMPLAINT?**

- 4.1 Anyone who receives, requests or is affected by our services can make a complaint. Additionally, we accept complaints from the representative of a person who is dissatisfied with our service, for example relatives, friends or advisers. In these instances, we will need to first obtain confirmation in writing from the complainant that they have authorised the person to act on their behalf. In certain circumstances we may take verbal consent direct from the complainant to deal with a third party and will follow up in writing to confirm this.
- 4.2 Anonymous complaints will be considered if there is enough information to enable us to make further enquiries. Anonymous complaints will be recorded with any learning from the complaint and action taken.

#### **5. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CONCERN AND A COMPLAINT**

- 5.1 A concern is an expression of worry or doubt over an issue considered to be important for which reassurances are sought.
- 5.2 A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about something the College has or has not done, or about the standard of service provided by the College or on behalf of the College. It also includes concerns about students' activities whilst on college-owned property or staff's activities whilst engaged in College business.
- 5.3 It is in everyone's interest that concerns and complaints are resolved as early as possible. Many issues can be resolved informally without the need to use the formal stages of the complaints procedure. Once a concern is drawn to our attention, we will make every effort to resolve matters quickly. We understand, however, that there are occasions when people would like to raise their concerns formally and in these instances we will do everything we can to resolve the issue through the stages outlined in the complaints procedure below.

#### **6. SCOPE OF COMPLAINTS PROCESS**

- 6.1 This policy includes all complaints about any provision of facilities or services by TBCG. How to make a complaint about other matters relating to the College's operations are listed below:

<b>Exceptions</b>	<b>For more information and who to contact</b>

A concern about a decision relating to exam board grades, marks and assessments	See the Academic Appeals Procedure - <a href="#">Link</a>
A concern about bullying, harassment or discrimination	See the Anti-Bullying Policy, although if this cannot be resolved informally through this procedure, then a formal complaint can be made - <a href="#">Link</a>
A concern about a student's own disciplinary process	See the Student Disciplinary Policy- <a href="#">Link</a>
A request for information under the Data Protection Act	Email: <a href="mailto:mydata@bedford.ac.uk">mydata@bedford.ac.uk</a> See the Data Privacy Policy - <a href="#">Link</a>
A request for information under the Freedom of Information Act	Email: <a href="mailto:freedomofinformation@bedford.ac.uk">freedomofinformation@bedford.ac.uk</a> See the Freedom of Information Policy - <a href="#">Link</a>
A grievance or concern made by a member of staff	See Staff Discipline, Grievance and Appeals Procedure - <a href="#">Link</a>

## **7. HOW TO RAISE A CONCERN OR MAKE A COMPLAINT**

- 7.1 A concern can be made in person, via email or by telephone, and should be raised with a member of staff. If the issue remains unresolved, the next step is to make a formal complaint.
- 7.2 A complaint can be made via email, via our online form on our website or by telephone. Where a complaint is made verbally, we will make a record of the key points of the complaint raised.
- 7.3 Where a complaint is raised via a digital channel managed and controlled by TBCG, for example our official Facebook or Twitter channels, we will explain that we do not take complaints on social media but we will tell the person how they can complain. However, in exceptional circumstances we may respond to very simple complaints on social media. This will normally only be appropriate where an issue is likely to affect a large number of people and we can provide a very simple response.
- 7.4 We may also become aware that an issue has been raised via a digital channel not controlled or managed by us. In such cases, we may respond where we consider it appropriate by telling the person how they can complain.
- 7.5 Complaints relating to members of staff will be shared with the Human Resources team to determine if they should be investigated under the Discipline, Grievance & Appeals Policy instead.
- 7.6 Where complaints are in relation to a senior postholder at TBCG, such as the CEO, Deputy CEO or Executive Director of HR, the Board of Governors (via the Director of Governance) will be asked to investigate the complaint.

7.7 Complaints about safeguarding concerns will be shared with the Director of Student Services.

7.8 For complaints about contracted services, such as courses or catering, we recognise that we remain responsible and accountable for ensuring the services provided meet our standard. We will ensure the third party either complies with this policy or has their own policy in place which fully meets the standards set out in this document. Depending upon the nature of the complaint, TBCG may investigate complaints to deliver services on its behalf. Where the complaint is to be dealt with by a third party, TBCG will ensure the complainant is provided with information on how to complain and that appropriate information sharing between the organisations takes place.

## **8. TIME LIMIT FOR MAKING COMPLAINTS**

8.1 Complaints must be raised within six months of when the complainant first knew of the problem, unless there are special circumstances for considering complaints beyond this time, for example where a person was not able to complain due to serious illness or recent bereavement.

8.2 This time limit will be applied with discretion, taking into account the seriousness of the issue, the availability of relevant records, staff involved, how long ago the event occurred, and the likelihood that an investigation will lead to a practical benefit for the complainant or useful learning for the College.

## **9. COMPLIMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS**

9.1 Compliments and suggestions are also welcomed and valued by TBCG. These comments are recorded and passed on to the relevant department and/or person. Compliments and suggestions can be sent to the College by using the same contact methods as in Appendix 1, section 2.1.

## **10. SUPPORTING COMPLAINANTS TO ACCESS OUR SERVICE**

10.1 Everyone has the right to equal access to our compliments, suggestions and complaints service, and we recognise that some people may face barriers to accessing this service, such as physical, sensory, communication or language barriers. To support people to overcome these, we will:

- Provide a number of different communication channels for people to provide feedback, for example via digital channels which allow for screen readers, braille display, screen magnifiers and speech recognition software
- Proactively check whether people who contact us require additional support
- Accept complaints from representatives/ third parties, subject to authorisation from the complainant.

10.2 To ensure that we operate a fair, equal and accessible compliments, suggestions and complaints process to all, on our online forms we give complainants the

option to complete equality, diversity and inclusion information so that we can analyse feedback from different protected groups. This information is optional and anonymised so that feedback is kept completely confidential.

## **11. MAINTAINING CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION**

- 11.1 TBCG is mindful of its requirement to comply with the Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018, Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).
- 11.2 Where personal information of someone considered as an adult may be discussed in a complaint, we will request permission to proceed from the person(s) involved.
- 11.3 A confidential and secure record will be maintained by the Customer Feedback department relating to all correspondence with the College relating to complaints, suggestions and compliments.
- 11.4 Record of complaints, suggestions and compliments received by the College will be securely retained for a total period of seven years in line with the Group's Data Retention Policy.

## **12. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **12.1 Complainant**

The complainant will receive a more effective response to the complaint if they:

- Explain the complaint in full as early as possible
- Co-operate with the College in seeking a solution to the complaint
- Respond promptly to requests for information or meetings or in agreeing the details of the complaint
- Ask for assistance if needed
- Treat all those involved in the complaint with respect
- Refrain from publicising the details of their complaint on social media and respect confidentiality.

### **12.2 Investigator**

The investigating officer's role is to establish the facts relevant to the complaint by:

- Providing a comprehensive, open, transparent and fair consideration of the complaint through:
  - Sensitive and thorough interviewing of people relevant to the complaint
  - Consideration of records and other relevant information
  - Analysing information
- Liaising with the complainant and complaints co-ordinator as appropriate to clarify what the complainant feels would put things right.

### **12.3 Complaints Co-ordinator**

The complaints co-ordinator should:

- Ensure that the complainant is fully updated at each stage of the procedure
- Liaise with staff members and other relevant bodies and people to ensure the smooth running of the complaints procedure
- Be aware of issues regarding sharing third party information, additional support which may be needed by a complainant when making a complaint
- Keeping accurate records.

## **APPENDIX 1**

### **COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE**

#### **1. Informal Complaints – Stage 0**

- 1.1 If you are dissatisfied with the service or treatment you receive you should first raise the matter with a member of staff. Tell them exactly what you are unhappy about and ask for their help in putting it right. Most problems will be resolved quickly and informally in this way.
- 1.2 Issues raised verbally to a member of staff will be, wherever possible, dealt with immediately by the staff member. However, there may be some instances where the complaint is referred to the appropriate line manager, the College's quality department or the College's Customer Feedback department.

#### **2. Formal Complaints – Stage 1**

- 2.1 Where it has not been possible to satisfactorily resolve matters informally, a formal complaint should be submitted to the College via:
  - Our online form on our website: [Complaints and Feedback | The Bedford College Group | Complaints Procedure](#)
  - Email: [complaints@bedford.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@bedford.ac.uk)
  - Telephone: 01234 291919.
- 2.2 Should any other member of staff be sent details of a complaint directly, this will be forwarded to the Customer Feedback department as soon as possible in order for the complaint to be formally logged and processed. Only when the Customer Feedback department receives the complaint will the response timescales provided within this policy apply.
- 2.3 To ensure a prompt response the complaint must be specific and comprehensively documented. You should present full details, including:
  - Your name
  - Contact telephone number
  - Contact email address
  - Details of your complaints including whether you have already spoken to someone at the College about it (please give as much detail as possible, such as dates, locations and witnesses as appropriate)
  - What actions you feel might resolve the problem at this stage
  - Any relevant documents.
- 2.4 You should expect to receive an acknowledgement of your written complaint within three working days.
- 2.5 Complaints will be allocated to an appropriate investigating officer within the College who will investigate in a thorough, objective and transparent manner and provide a formal response. The response will detail any actions taken to investigate the complaint and provide a full explanation of the decision made



and the reason(s) for it. Where appropriate, it will include details of actions the College will take to resolve the complaint.

- 2.6 You will normally receive a response from the investigating officer within 21 working days setting out the result of the investigation and any actions that will be taken. However, where complaints involve complex or multiple complaints, in order to ensure that the investigation process is complete and robust, investigations may take longer.
- 2.7 If the investigation is likely to exceed 21 working days, we will contact you and tell you when we expect a response to be available.
- 2.8 Communication with you will be through your preferred route, i.e. post, email, etc. If a preferred route isn't indicated, the response will be via the medium that the complaint was initially sent.

### **3 Appeal – Stage 2**

- 3.1 If a Stage 1 complaint is closed but it is felt that the complaint remains unresolved, you can make a formal appeal through:
  - Our online form on our website: [Complaints and Feedback | The Bedford College Group | Complaints Procedure](#)
  - Email: [complaints@bedford.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@bedford.ac.uk)
  - Or by writing in to: FAO Head of Planning and Insight, Customer Feedback Department, The Bedford College Group, c/o Bedford College, Cauldwell Street, Bedford MK42 9AH.
- 3.2 You will need to make an appeal within five working days of receipt of the outcome and include in your communications:
  - The reference number of the original complaint
  - Full and specific details about why you wish to appeal, for example the way in which the complaint was dealt with, or why you are appealing against the findings and/or actions.
- 3.3 Requests outside of this time period will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.
- 3.4 You should expect to receive an acknowledgement of your appeal within three working days.
- 3.5 A Senior Investigating Officer will be appointed to review the evidence and respond to you within five working days of being appointed. Where appeals involve complex or multiple complaints, in order to ensure that the investigation process is complete and robust, investigations may take longer.
- 3.6 If the investigation is likely to exceed five working days, we will contact the complainant and tell them when we expect a response to be available.
- 3.7 The outcome of the appeal is the final decision of the college and no further internal investigation will take place relating to this specific complaint.

#### **4. Attending a Meeting**

- 4.1 Where a meeting, either face-to-face or online, is deemed appropriate by both parties, you may bring someone along to provide support. This can be a relative or friend. Generally, we do not encourage either party to bring legal representatives to the meeting, however there may be occasions where it is appropriate.
- 4.2 Representatives from the media are not permitted to attend.
- 4.3 The meeting will be held in private. Electronic recordings of the meetings or conversations are not normally permitted unless a complainant's own disability or special needs require it. Prior knowledge and consent of all parties attending must be sought before meetings or conversations take place. Consent will be recorded in any minutes taken.

#### **5. Withdrawing a Complaint**

- 5.1 If you wish to withdraw your complaint at any time, we will ask for this to be confirmed in writing.

#### **6. Next Steps**

- 6.1 If you remain dissatisfied with the way in which the College has dealt with your complaint or we have acted unlawfully or unreasonably in the exercise of our duties under education law, you may wish to complain to the appropriate awarding body or one of the following funding bodies:

##### **6.2 *Further Education: Department for Education (DfE)***

The DfE will not normally investigate the substance of complaints or overturn any decisions made by TBCG. They will consider whether TBCG has adhered to education legislation and any statutory policies connected with the complaint.

You can contact the DfE by:

- Online at [www.education.gov/contactus](http://www.education.gov/contactus)
- Tel: 0370 000 2288
- Writing to Department for Education, Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester M1 2WD.

##### **6.3 *Higher Education: Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)***

If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of the College's internal complaints process, you may escalate your complaint to the OIA once the internal procedures are complete. You should receive a Completion of Procedures Letter from the College, which outlines the decision and the deadline for submitting a complaint to the OIA.

The OIA must receive your complaint within 12 months of the date on your Completion of Procedures Letter.

You can contact the OIA by:

- Online: [www.oiahe.org.uk](http://www.oiahe.org.uk)
- Email: [enquiries@oiahe.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oiahe.org.uk)
- Tel: 0118 959 9813
- Writing to Office of the Independent Adjudicator, Second Floor, Abbey Gate, 57–75 Kings Road, Reading, RG1 3AB, UK