

Adult Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Complaints Working Group

Notes from a meeting with Jane Burke, Adult Learning, 23 September 2005

Present: Cllr Brenda Jennings
Jane Burke
Julia King
Clare Capjon

The Buckinghamshire Adult Learning Service (BAL) provides learning opportunities to all adults across Buckinghamshire. The service currently provides courses for 20,000 students with 35,000 enrolments. Complaints over the past few years have fallen, with 99 recorded between September 2004 and July 2005. The ALS tries to resolve complaints initially at a local level and these 99 reflect complaints that could not be dealt with in this way. Only about 10-20 of these 99 would involve the Head of Service, the rest being resolved by staff at County Hall.

Adult Learning has achieved Charter Mark status and as part of this is required to monitor complaints centrally. These are dealt with manually at present and no computer system is used in the monitoring process. An individual member of staff has the role of monitoring complaints and is copied in with all correspondence and the final outcome.

Generally, the type of issues raised by complaints are around venues, equipment etc. If a complaint is received about a venue, the issue would be taken up with the owner who would be given the opportunity to make the necessary improvements. If this is unsatisfactory, the service would seek an alternative venue. Where large venue contacts are concerned, withholding a small percentage of the funding until improvements are made, can result in action. Fortunately, there is rarely the need for this course of action. Refunds to students are generally not provided, unless the service cancels the course or unless the individual is clearly and significantly on the wrong course. There are quality mechanisms in place for classes. Where a complaint is made by a student about a tutor, the tutor would be observed and given the opportunity to comment and feedback from the rest of the class considered.

The only trend observed in complaints over the past few years was when the service moved its enquiries to the 0845 telephone number. The service had considerably underestimated demand. Often staff find that explaining the reason for a decision or situation diffuses the issue. Paperwork is sometimes an issue for people but it is an unfortunate necessity. Attendance can be a problem sometimes and it is important that the tutor is sufficiently skilled to deal with this at the earliest opportunity. All learners are given a 'student's charter' which outlines the rights and responsibilities of all course members. In week one of each course, the tutor takes the class through this charter.

The ALS actively seeks the views of its users through an annual consultation process and focus groups. The latter can either be self-selected through the survey forms (the ALS acknowledges the limitations of this method), or staff have gone to classes to obtain their views (a mix of inreach and outreach).

Comments cards are available in all centres used by the service and all tutors are provided with them too for giving to their learners. The majority of complaints are made directly to reception staff and tutors. Some are emailed or sent by letter and a small number dealt with through the formal complaints process. Written complaints are

generally sent to the adult learning Information Centre in Winslow, although some are sent directly to County Hall.

The adult learning service also has a data centre at Iver (the Evreham Centre) for paper enrolments and those relating to courses at the Missenden Centre.

The Customer First Contact Centre will be taking general enquiries and complaints in the first stage of roll-out. The ALS considers it vital that the customer service provided by staff in the Contact Centre does not compromise the quality standards required by the Adult Learning service. As well as the Charter Mark, the ALS also has Matrix, an award based on how well services provide advice and information and how they gather and act on feedback. Funding is also dependent on achieving and maintaining standards and at present Matrix is a requirement of Learning and Skills Council funds. The Contact Centre must ensure that it at least meets these standards. It is also important that learners do not have added steps that they have to go through resulting from the transfer. Brenda Jennings commented that the customer service provided by ALS is currently first class but that if this is not maintained, learners could go elsewhere for their courses.

At present, enquiries are handled by the staff in Winslow and Iver, but if specialist advice is required, for example around whether a particular course is appropriate this advice would come from a tutor or tutor co-ordinator. Contact Centre staff must have this initial level of knowledge and must be aware of when specialist input is needed as customer care can be an important factor in an individual's rate of learning. It may be that the adult learning service provides a team of staff for the Contact Centre. The ALS is encouraged that the Customer First team are working with the service and are asking for the right information.

Online booking was started in December 2004, and now accounts for 70 enrolments per week.. it is expected that the use of the internet in this way will increase considerably over the next few years. This will not negate the need for personal contact in some cases however.

All adult learning staff are trained to handle complaints and attend an accredited learning course on information and advice. Most complaints grow if people don't feel listened to and therefore the service places great emphasis on dealing with complaints as quickly as possible.

The ALS has a number of systems in place to ensure that people are on the appropriate course/level for them. On some academic courses there is a week zero session to assess learners' levels of knowledge and for language courses separate information and advice sessions are run during the summer (and people can still transfer at the start of the course).

Academic courses are the most difficult to get right as many people need certain skills or qualifications for work. For example, recently staff at the Information Centre flagged up with staff at County Hall an individual who wanted to enrol on a number of stretching academic courses. Staff at County Hall discussed this with the individual to ensure that they understood the implications of what was being taken on. As the individual was committed to the courses, the service put a number of mechanisms in place to ensure that the learner was supported as much as possible in their studies. The service has funding set aside for such support.

C Capjon
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