

## Service Standards

Newcastle University Students' Union (NUSU) Student Advice Centre aims to deliver a service that meets the needs of users, is accessible and of a high quality. We have produced this information to make you aware of the standards you can expect of our service.

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*Note: In this document 'a client' is defined as a Newcastle University Students' Union member, including staff, or anyone else we have agreed to advise, who has contacted the Student Advice Centre.*

## **1 THE STUDENT ADVICE CENTRE**

### **1.1 Our general Aims and Purposes**

The Student Advice Centre aims to provide a specialist and independent information, advice and representation service. This is available to current Newcastle University students. Additionally we can offer information and advice to prospective students, alumni students (up to one year following graduation) and Students' Union staff, but we are not able to represent in these circumstances. It is a service operated by and within the Students' Union. Our service is free, professional, independent, impartial and confidential, and available to all eligible parties equally.

### **1.2 Staff**

Student Advice Centre advisers are professionals who undergo continual training in general advice-giving and in specialist subjects. They are directly responsible to the Director of Membership and Democratic Services. The Student Adviser, Administrative Assistant and B.E.S.S. Assistant are immediately responsible to the Senior Advisers for line management but all staff members are ultimately responsible to the Students' Union Chief Executive.

Every effort has been made to ensure that:

- the Student Advice Centre recruits qualified and suitable staff
- staff undergo appropriate training
- staff receive appropriate supervision and support
- staff are indemnified against loss and liability through Students' Union insurance policies, subject to any wilful, reckless or negligent act or omission on their part.

### **1.3 Working Procedures**

- a) Clients are expected to make appointments. Appointments are allocated a 60 minute duration. This consists of a maximum of up to 40 minutes client interview time, and 20 minutes writing-up time for the Adviser.
- b) Clients who arrive more than 15 minutes late for an appointment will not be seen (this will be at the discretion of the Adviser). The next available

appointment will be offered, except where a client has been persistently late (see section 5(c) below).

- c) A student group attending for advice will each be required to complete a case sheet for entry onto Advice Pro case management system as they are each receiving the advice. The exception to this being where another student is attending in a support role.
- d) Advisers must be satisfied there is a genuine need for a client to be accompanied by another person(s) to the appointment. The service will try to provide an environment where a client can talk freely and openly without control, coercion, challenge or interruption from other persons. Advisers may restrict attendance at the appointment of family, partners, friends, children or fellow students particularly if the Adviser feels attendance may hinder the discussion with the client or be in their best interests. The exception to this is being a student group all attending for the same advice.
- e) Particular effort will always be made to accommodate real emergencies.

## **2 OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

### **2.1 Client care**

Student Advice Centre staff should at all times:

- a) Welcome clients with respect and courtesy and make them feel at ease
- b) Endeavour to be responsive to clients' needs
- c) Promote the welfare of the client and to act in no way prejudicial to their interests
- d) Listen sympathetically and with due regard to any cultural differences
- e) Assess all relevant aspects of any case presented
- f) Manage client expectations
- g) Inform clients of the potential for conflict of interest and our policies for dealing with these situations (see section 4)
- h) Inform the client of available options and check these are understood
- i) Enable and if appropriate assist the clients to pursue their chosen course of action.
- j) Use data collated from student cases, to highlight pertinent and regular issues to NUSU Sabbatical team for their consideration and potential action within

Newcastle University community and where relevant on a regional or national level.

Staff have a specific duty of care to all students but with particular consideration to Under 18s in conjunction with the Students' Union policy. See section 14a.

## **2.2 Client empowerment**

Student Advice Centre staff should ensure that clients at all times retain control of their own cases. Clients alone determine what their own interests are and which course of action they wish to follow or wish staff to follow on their behalf, subject to the provisions of section 5 below (Limitations of Service). The purpose of the service is to assist clients in solving their own problems, we will not make decisions for clients nor will we do all the work for them. Clients are expected to be proactive in doing what they can for themselves. This is highlighted from the outset on the appointment slip.

## **2.3 Impartiality**

Staff should remain impartial and not express personal preferences or seek to persuade clients as to which course of action they should choose.

## **2.4 Independence**

The Student Advice Centre is part of the Students' Union organisation and therefore is independent of the University and all other organisations. As employees of the Students' Union the Student Advice Centre staff cannot be independent of the Students' Union but we will remain impartial and provide practical advice and information. We cannot however, represent clients against the Students' Union. We will consider the best interests of our clients, subject only to our Limitations of Service (section 5 below) and section 2.1 above.

## **2.5 Confidentiality**

- a) All Student Advice Centre staff and student volunteers have signed a confidentiality agreement, to which they are obligated without exception, unless specifically subjected to Court subpoena. All Students' Union staff, Volunteers and external visitors who have any presence in the Student Advice Centre are also required to sign the confidentiality agreement. The Students' Union Chief Executive and Director of Membership and Democratic Services have also signed the agreement and will only be provided with information about a client by exception. Only Student Advice Centre staff have access to student

records. On rare occasions these may have to be discussed with the senior staff mentioned above. All new clients should be informed from the outset about our confidentiality policy.

- b) The Student Advice Centre have a separate and more detailed Confidentiality and Breach Policy, which sets out the detail of when and where confidentiality may need to be breached. This can be provided on request.
- c) The Student Advice Centre operates an electronic Case Management system whereby all clients' data is stored on external servers within the EEA. The service does this to be as paperless as possible but to also be more secure in data storage. The software is currently provided by ACM Solutions and has been developed in conjunction with AdviceUK, our licensing body. The advantage with having the clients' data on external servers means that it is not accessible by anyone other than the Student Advice Centre staff and further ensures the clients' information is confidential. The Student Advice Centre requests clients to complete a manual signature sheet upon initial contact with the Student Advice Centre. This sheet declares to the client that the data will be transferred onto the electronic system and stored externally. This signature sheet denotes agreement with this. **As a matter of good practice Advisers should also alert them to this fact at the initial appointment.** This Case Management system is password protected and only Student Advice Centre staff have access permission to use the system. Clients can elect to have their case details stored manually if they prefer.
- d) The Senior Advisers use external supervision to discuss and consult on cases they are having difficulty progressing. The external supervisor is an advice professional at another institution and where this is necessary the adviser will anonymise the case as much as possible. The external supervisor is also bound by the confidentiality agreement. No other outside party or second tier advice agency will be contacted or informed of a client's affairs or of their personal details without their express written authorisation. This can be either in letter format or as an email. The Student Advice Centre will not confirm or deny usage of the service to enquiries, subject to the requirement by senior staff as outlined in 2a and 2b above. The Student Advice Centre staff will not contact, or respond to contact by, parents, tutors/supervisors or any authority without such prior written consent from the client
- e) If any client feels worried about respect of confidentiality then they are entitled to see the appropriate signed confidentiality agreements and will be encouraged to talk to the particular Adviser about the matter prior to interview. However, in order to proceed as a client the service does require as a very minimum a name, student number and one form of contact information. We cannot deal with a client anonymously.

- f) No personal information about students will be held on Facebook, Twitter, Texttank, or Hootsuite without prior written or verbal consent.
- g) Students will not be directly contacted via SMS message (using Texttank) without prior consent. Only template messages are to be sent.
- h) If a member of staff ever breaches confidentiality, they are responsible for notifying the client to explain how, when and why this occurred.
- i) Occasionally parents or guardians contact the Service wishing to discuss a case. We cannot disclose or divulge any information about a student to a parent/guardian. We cannot acknowledge whether they are using the service or not and advise that a parent/guardian discusses it with the student first and ask them to contact the service and give permission to do this.
- j) A Parent/Guardian can attend an appointment a student, however this can be in a supporting capacity only. The Student Advice Centre will not discuss an individual's case with a third party in their absence( unless with prior written and agreed consent from the student).

## **2.6 Quality of Work**

- a) All our clients are entitled to receive the most careful and diligent service that can reasonably be expected from the Student Advice Centre staff, as promptly as possible in relation to the demands of the case. The Student Advice Centre adheres to relevant national advice and guidance standards.
- b) If a member of staff finds that they do not have the specialist knowledge to deal with a client's problem, they should consult a colleague or their external case supervisor or alternatively an outside agency. If necessary and adviser can formally refer the client on if the client consents.
- c) When referring clients to outside agencies the Student Advice Centre staff should explain the possible implications, of this step to the client. When a referral is agreed and the referral agency requires a history or copy of the case file and details, the client will provide the Student Advice Centre with a letter of instruction or authority for the release of this information. This letter will be scanned and uploaded to the Case Management system.
- d) It is the duty of our staff to keep a proper record of all visits, telephone calls, correspondence and other actions taken in pursuance of the client's case.
- e) The Student Advice Centre staff should keep clients properly informed of developments in their case.

- f) If a member of staff feels unable to progress a particular matter at a particular time then they will discuss the case with their external supervisor, and will either postpone dealing with it or hand it over to a colleague or to an outside agency, as the client prefers.

## **2.7 Social Policy Work**

- a) In the interests of the student body and with the intention of identifying areas for improvement, redress campaigning or change, our service will monitor and record instances/trends or patterns of case subjects matter. These will be discussed at team meetings which include NUSU Welfare and Equality Officer. Issues that are reoccurring or of particular significance, will be presented to the Campaigns and Issues meetings held bi-termly.
- b) NUS also collate anonymised demographic and case type data from the Advice Pro Case management system which is analysed to create the National Casework Reporting; Annual Report
- c) National Homelessness Advisory Service (NHAS) and Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) have social policy mechanism we can also utilise to inform on a national level if we feel this is relevant.

## **3 ADVISER ALLOCATION**

- a) When a client visits the Student Advice Centre they will usually be seen first by a staff member or student volunteer at Reception. This person will briefly assess whether it is appropriate for them to answer a general enquiry themselves or whether to refer the client on an Adviser or another agency for advice.
- b) If an existing client at any time feels uneasy with a particular Student Advice Centre staff member or dissatisfied with the service given, they:
- should make a request to see a Senior Adviser, or -
  - if one of the Senior Advisers is the subject of the client's dissatisfaction/unease they should make a request to see another Senior Adviser or the Director of Membership and Democratic Services who will explore the matter with the client and reach a decision as soon as practicable. The Director of Membership and Democratic Services may request the details of the clients dealings with the Student Advice Centre.
  - Alternatively, or additionally, the client may wish to make a formal complaint (see section 12 below).
- c) A request to transfer to another Adviser will normally be refused if:

- it stems from an attitude in conflict with the Student's Union Equal Opportunities Policy or Respect Statement;
- it is based on whim or manipulative intent;
- it arises from inappropriate expectations of our role;
- service has been formally withdrawn from the client under the provisions of section 5 below.

#### **4 CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

- a) No Adviser can knowingly interview or otherwise serve both parties to a dispute or other conflict of interest. In the event that a conflict between two clients is brought to the Student Advice Centre, the duty of the Adviser initially approached is to the first presenting client. The other client will be referred to another appropriate service.
- b) To avoid revealing that the other party has already consulted the Student Advice Centre the following procedure should be followed:-
- Where the client makes it clear at the outset that the other party is also a potential future client, the Adviser should ask for permission to reveal in writing, if approached by the other party on the same issue, that they have already been consulted by the client. If permission is given, there will be no breach of confidentiality if the Adviser explains to the other party why they cannot see them.
  - If the client refuses, the matter should be referred to the Director of Membership and Democratic Services as this refusal will potentially place the Adviser in a compromised position - in such a situation the Senior Advisers may have no alternative but to refuse service.
  - If the conflict of interest is unforeseen and becomes apparent only in the course of an interview the staff member should seek to refer to an outside agency. If nevertheless the client becomes aware that the other party has already approached the Student Advice Centre this is unfortunate, but cannot be construed as a culpable breach of confidentiality on the Adviser's part.
- c) Where the Student Advice Centre is offering Mediation to two or more parties this will be offered by appropriately trained Mediators who have not previously been involved with the client(s). See section 10.
- d) Likewise the Student Advice Centre staff cannot independently advise anyone with a complaint about the Students' Union and/or its staff including the Student Advice Centre staff themselves. The client in this situation will be provided with information on process only - [www.nusu.co.uk/complaints](http://www.nusu.co.uk/complaints) and where possible advised of alternative means of assistance.

## 5 REFUSAL/LIMITATIONS/WITHDRAWAL OF SERVICE

- a) If assisting in the client's chosen course of action would cause conflict with the Student Advice Centre or with the Students' Union regulations and guidelines or with the law, then the Adviser concerned should:
- decline to follow it,
  - explain to the client why,
  - suggest alternative courses of action, and
  - alternative sources of advice/assistance to which they might turn.
- b) The Student Advice Centre may limit assistance to 'advice only' if the Adviser believes, to follow the course of action preferred by a client, would prove counter-productive to the client's interests. Assistance may also cease altogether if the Adviser believes the course of action would bring the Adviser, the Student Advice Centre or the Students' Union into disrepute. Such decisions should be discussed with the Director for Membership and Democratic Services if the client is dissatisfied with the explanation given. If the Student Advice Centre needs to withdraw service the client will be notified in writing.
- c) The Student Advice Centre reserves the right (subject to confirmation by the Director of Membership and Democratic Services) to withdraw from a client's case if:
- the Student Advice Centre finds that a client has deliberately lied on material issues (thus potentially compromising the reputation and standing of both the Adviser and the service) or
  - the client becomes abusive or violent to the Adviser (see section 14c) or
  - the client attempts to involve the Adviser in immoral or illegal pursuits or
  - the client *persistently*, and without good cause, fails to keep appointments or in other ways wastes the Adviser's time, such as by continually seeking our advice but never acting on it, or
  - the client is already being advised by another agency on the same matter and/or there is evidence of continued counterproductive networking between agencies.
  - the client becomes overly demanding and insistent on being dealt with on their terms instead of those of the Adviser

## **6 CLIENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES**

Our Clients have certain responsibilities, notably:-

- a) to treat our Advisers with respect and refrain from violence, intimidation or abuse and adhere to the Student's Union Respect Statement; (see section 14c);
- b) to retain control of their own cases and be proactive in bringing about a resolution as per section 2.2
- c) to not knowingly deceive an Adviser or withhold relevant information in such a way as to compromise the advice or assistance being sought;
- d) not to deliberately involve Advisers in any unethical or illegal activity (as opposed to seeking their advice about illegal acts already committed by the client, which is perfectly acceptable);
- e) to inform us of their need to cancel or postpone a pre-arranged appointment;
- f) to inform us if they are also consulting others (in particular another Student Advice Centre Adviser, University staff, solicitor, other advice agency) on the same issue;
- g) to inform us of any decision to drop, or change their position on, a matter being pursued by the Student Advice Centre;
- h) to inform us of any relevant change in their circumstances, address, etc;
- i) clients accept that by not complying with these obligations they risk the limitation or withdrawal of service (see section 5).

## **7 CLIENTS' ACCESS TO FILES**

- a) Clients have the right to see their own files, whether held on paper or on computer, and to obtain a copy. They can make this request under the Data Protection Act 1998. We will require a written request and this may take up to 40 days from receipt of the request to provide. We reserve the right to make a charge. The public are entitled to make requests under this Act in regards to all other non-advice aspects of the Student Advice Centre apart from client/casework.

- b) Student Unions are not public authorities and are therefore not subject to the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act 2000. Even though our data is held externally it is not held by a public authority and is likewise not subject to the FOI Act 2000.
- c) If individuals require information about a specific case they will need to gain the written permission of the originating client. In addition the Student Advice Centre will not confirm or deny whether the person being enquired about is a client without the permission of that client (see 2.5c and 4b above). Any exceptions to this our outlined in our detailed Confidentiality and Breach policy
- d) Clients are also entitled to request copies of information held about them from any second tier advice agency that may have been used whilst dealing with their case. Whilst consent for disclosure must have been sought when the client's case was taken on, the Adviser should inform the client prior to each contact with the second tier agency, to enable the client to exercise their right to request information being held about them. Where the client cannot be told in advance this should take place at the next contact.
- e) The Student Advice Centre will provide contact details of any second tier agency involved at the client's written request. The client needs to request this themselves as the Student Advice Centre will not be able to acquire this for them.

## **8 SECURITY OF CASE RECORDS AND CLIENTS' DOCUMENTS**

- a) The Student Advice Centre uses an electronic case management system called AdvicePro. This is a secure case management software solution provided by ACM Solutions in conjunction with AdviceUK. When students come to the Student Advice Centre for drop in or an appointment they are asked to complete a signatory sheet which informs the client their personal data will be input onto this system and housed on external servers and provides the Student Advice Centre with their agreement for this to happen. All the personal data, documents and case notes held on the system are only ever manipulated for statistical purposes and used by the Student Advice Centre. All the signature sheets are held in lockable filing cabinets.
- b) The Student Advice Centre also holds confidential information on another external server known as Texttank. This is used for an SMS reminder service, where the client is sent a text message to their mobile phone to remind them of their appointment/inform them of a cancellation. Permission is sought consent form with tick box or verbal consent (if appointment is made over the telephone) for details to be held at [www.texttank.co.uk](http://www.texttank.co.uk). This is password protected.

- c) No original documents will be retained unless absolutely necessary. Wherever possible a scanned copy or photocopy should be taken, or provided by the client. If a scanned document is taken this will be sent via email to the relevant allocated adviser and they will attach this to the electronic case file. The Student Advice Centre does not house these documents on their servers. Manual documents are only held where it is not possible to hold an electronic copy.
- d) All important documents will be kept in a lockable filing cabinet.
- e) If it is necessary for any staff member to take a case file and/or related documents off Student Advice Centre premises, this may only be done with the express consent of the client and specific higher line management authority.
- f) Occasionally Advisers need to consult with second tier advice agencies. They may do so after first obtaining written consent to disclose personal information to second tier advice agencies. These second tier advice agencies may provide written confirmation of advice which should be included in the Student Advice Centre case record. This should not be passed on directly to the client but be used as a basis for advising the client.
- g) The data controller for all data held by the Student Advice Centre is The Students' Union (ICO reference number: Z530792X). The Student's Union has been the registered controller with the Information Commissioners Office since 30<sup>th</sup> of May 2002. This allows the Student Advice Centre to hold data for clients under the third criteria of the Students' Union's data controlling rights, namely for the processing of information of not for profit organisations.

## **9 STUDENT VOLUNTEERS**

The Student Advice Centre recruits a number of student volunteers each year. These volunteers compliment the service by assisting in a variety of tasks including but not limited to administration and front of house duties. Inevitably they are present in the service and may see and hear information about students and cases. They have access to the service email inbox and service calendar which includes limited information such as student names and contact details when covering reception but they do not have access to the case management system or student case sheets. From time to time they may also be asked to attend team meetings. All student volunteers sign a confidentiality agreement. Any student volunteer who breaches confidentiality would be subject to the Students' Union disciplinary procedures.

## **10 MEDIATION**

- a) Individuals or groups may approach University or Union departments about a specific issue or complaint about another individual or group. Where the matter is not one that the University or Union can intervene with or take action on they may consider making a referral on agreement with the individual or group, to the Student Advice Centre Mediation Service. It should be explained at this point to the referring department that they will not be notified of the outcome of the Mediation process without the permission of the individual or group being referred.
- b) The Student Advice Centre has a mediation Policy and Procedure which can be provided on request.
- c) The Student Advice Centre has trained Community Mediators.

## **11 EVALUATION**

- a) It is in the interests of all parties and of our service that we should be able to gauge the effectiveness of the service we provide, including the advice received and the manner in which it was provided; the literature and information available; the helpfulness of admin and reception and the suitability of the waiting area. To this end our clients are invited to make suggestions, comments and/or complaints about any aspect of our service, anonymously and confidentially if they so wish. Upon closure of a case the client will be sent an evaluation email containing a link to the electronic evaluation form. This same link is included on the signature of all Student Advice Centre staff and on the Student Advice Centre web pages. Anyone presenting to the Student Advice Centre in person wishing to provide us with feedback or make a complaint should be directed to the link via the service webpages – [www.nusu.co.uk/sacfeedback](http://www.nusu.co.uk/sacfeedback) Also see section 12 below.

## **12 COMPLAINTS PROCEDURE**

If a client has a serious complaint about any aspect of our service, or about any member of the Student Advice Centre staff, we advise them to make it known formally, in person to:

- A Student Advice Centre Senior Adviser, or;
- the Director of Membership and Democratic Services .

If the matter is not resolved at this level the complaint should follow the Students' Union Complaints Procedure, a full copy of which is available from the Students' Union Admin Office or on the website: [www.nusu.co.uk/complaints](http://www.nusu.co.uk/complaints)

### **13 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND RESPECT**

- a) Student Advice Centre staff and clients are bound by any Equal Opportunities or Respect statement issued by the Students' Union generally and by its disciplinary and grievance procedures. (See section 14). The Student Advice Centre additionally requests that clients do not use offensive language or behaviour in the course of interviews or service usage and dress in a manner unlikely to cause offence.
- b) Failure to comply with this requirement may entail:
  - in the case of clients or visitors: refusal of service, a request to leave our offices and possible disciplinary action where relevant.
  - in the case of staff: the disciplinary procedure may be implemented.

### **14 COMPLIMENTARY POLICIES**

The Student Advice Centre operates within all Students' Union policies but has particular reference to the policies below. Some of these can be found on NUSU website under the A-Z Library of documents or can be provided on request:

- a) Under 18 Policy
- b) Equality and Diversity Statement
- c) Respect Statement
- d) NUS Zero Tolerance to Sexual Harassment Policy
- e) Complaints Procedure
- f) Confidentiality and Breach Policy
- g) Mediation Policy

## 15 **MARKETING STANDARDS**

- a) No offensive content will feature on any Student Advice Centre marketing material.
- b) Student Advice Centre promotional material may be displayed on Students' Union premises and on campus with permission of the University and associated departments.
- c) In the first instance, any marketing material for distribution around the Students' Union building should be taken to the Marketing Department.