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Registered with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland NIC101695

COMPLAINTS AND WHISTLEBLOWING PROCEDURES

VALID FROM 2026

The Ulster College of Music is committed to providing a quality service for its members and working in an open and accountable way that builds trust and respect. One of the ways in which we can continue to improve our service is by listening and responding to the views of our students, parents/guardians, staff and tutors and in particular by responding positively to complaints, including whistleblowing complaints, and by putting mistakes right.

We aim to ensure that:

- making a complaint is as easy as possible;
- we treat a complaint as a clear expression of dissatisfaction with our service which calls for an immediate response;
- we deal with it promptly, politely and, when appropriate, confidentially;
- we respond in the right way - for example, with an explanation, or an apology where we have got things wrong, or information on any action taken etc.;
- we learn from complaints, use them to improve our service, and review annually our complaints policy and procedures.

We recognise that many concerns will be raised informally, and dealt with quickly. Our aims are to:

- resolve informal concerns quickly;
- keep matters low-key;
- enable mediation between the complainant and the individual to whom the complaint has been referred if required.

An informal approach is appropriate when it can be achieved. But if concerns cannot be satisfactorily resolved informally, then the formal complaints procedure should be followed. The formal complaints procedure is intended to ensure that all complaints are handled fairly, consistently and wherever possible resolved to the complainant's satisfaction.

Procedure for general complaints, disputes and grievances

A Complainant's responsibility is to:

- bring their complaint, in writing, to the attention normally within 8 weeks of the issue arising;
- raise concerns promptly and directly with the Administrator or a member of the Management Committee
- explain the problem as clearly and as fully as possible, including any action taken to date;

- allow the College a reasonable time to deal with the matter;
- recognise that some circumstances may be beyond the control of the College

The College's responsibility is to:

- acknowledge the formal complaint in writing
- respond within a stated period of time
- deal reasonably and sensitively with the complaint
- take action where appropriate.

Confidentiality: Every attempt will be made to ensure that both the complainant and the Ulster College of Music maintain confidentiality. However the circumstances giving rise to the complaint may be such that it may not be possible to maintain confidentiality (with each complaint judged on its own merit). Should this be the case, the situation will be explained to the complainant.

Monitoring and Reporting: Members of the Management Committee will receive an anonymised report of complaints made and their resolution.

Contact: Our contact details can be found on the College website.

Formal Complaints Procedure

Stage 1

In the first instance, if you are unable to resolve the issue informally, you should write to the member of staff, tutor or committee member who dealt with you, so that he or she has a chance to put things right. In your letter you should set out the details of your complaint, the consequences for you as a result, and the remedy you are seeking.

You can expect your complaint to be acknowledged within 5 working days of receipt. You should get a response and an explanation within 15 working days. If you are unsure who to write to, your complaint should be sent to the Chair of the Management Committee.

Stage 2

If you are not satisfied with the initial response to the complaint then you can write to the Chair of the Management Committee (or the Vice Chair, if your complaint is against the Chair) and ask for your complaint and the response to be reviewed. You can expect acknowledgement of your request within 5 working days of receipt and a response within 15 working days.

The aim is to resolve all matters as quickly as possible. However, inevitably some issues will be more complex and therefore may require longer to be fully investigated. Consequently timescales given for handling and responding to complaints are indicative. If a matter requires more detailed investigation, you will receive an interim response describing what is being done to deal with the matter, and when a full reply can be expected and from whom.

Final Stage

If you are not satisfied with the subsequent reply, then you must write to the Management Committee stating the reason why you are dissatisfied with the outcome. You must do this within 10 days of receiving the response at Stage 2. The Committee will then attempt to find a neutral, independent, individual from the membership (someone who has not held any position within the college as a tutor or volunteer) who will review the complaint and the responses and will suggest a way forward. This will normally be within 10 working days but if a response is delayed you will be informed of the action which will be taken to investigate your complaint, and when you can expect to hear the outcome of the investigation

Whistleblowing procedure

A whistleblower is an individual who reveals information about activity within an organization that is deemed illegal, immoral, illicit, unsafe or fraudulent. The wrongdoing disclosed must be in the public interest. Whistleblowers are protected by law under the Public Interest Disclosure (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and should not be treated unfairly or be dismissed because of blowing the whistle.

To be protected, the individual needs to reasonably believe that malpractice is happening, has happened or will happen and the disclosure needs to be made in the right way. Disclosures which can be characterised as being of a personal rather than a public interest will not be covered by whistleblowing law e.g. a matter of a personal grievance.

Whistleblowing complaints:

A qualifying disclosure (under the Public Interest Disclosure (NI) Order 1998) is one made by an individual who has a reasonable belief that any of the following is being, has been or is likely to be, committed:

- a criminal offence
- an act creating risk to people's health and safety
- risk or actual damage to the environment
- a miscarriage of justice
- failure to comply with a legal obligation
- the law also covers a deliberate attempt to cover-up any of these

The Ulster College of Music's policy is in place to help you raise a concern about malpractice in the right way and explains the routes available for doing this.

The College will not tolerate any harassment or victimisation of a whistleblower (including informal pressures) and will take appropriate action to protect you when you raise a concern in good faith.

To support to you throughout this process:

- you will be given full support from the Management Committee
- your concerns will be taken seriously and investigated fully

If you make an allegation in good faith and reasonably believing it to be true, but it is not confirmed by the investigation, the College will recognise your concern and you have nothing to fear.

However, it is against the law to make allegations maliciously and

- not to act in the public interest;
- make an allegation without having reasonable grounds for believing it to be substantially true;
- collect the information to support the allegations improperly, or;
- make an allegation for personal or 3rd party gain.

Formal whistleblowing procedure

Stage 1

In the first instance, if you are unable to resolve the issue informally, you should write to the member of staff, tutor or committee member whom you reasonably believe to be solely or mainly responsible for the relevant failure, so that he or she has a chance to put things right. In your letter you should set out the details of your complaint and the remedy you are seeking.

You can expect your complaint to be acknowledged within 5 working days of receipt. You should get a response and an explanation within 15 working days. If you are unsure who to write to, your complaint should be sent to the Chair of the Management Committee.

Confidentiality

In most cases the best way to raise a concern is to do so openly. By making your identity known, you are more likely to secure a positive outcome as openness makes it easier for us to address the issue, work out how to investigate the matter, understand the reasons for concerns, obtain full information and report back on the outcome of investigations undertaken. This policy encourages you to put your name to your whistleblowing disclosure.

We recognise that there may be circumstances when you would prefer to speak to someone in confidence first. If this is the case, please state this at the outset.

Stage 2

If you are not satisfied with the initial response to the complaint then you can write to the Chair of the Management Committee (or the Vice Chair, if your complaint is against the Chair) and ask for your complaint and the response to be reviewed. You can expect acknowledgement of your request within 5 working days of receipt and a response within 15 working days.

The aim is to resolve all matters as quickly as possible. However, inevitably some issues will be more complex and therefore may require longer to be fully investigated. Consequently timescales given for handling and responding to complaints are indicative. If a matter requires more detailed investigation, you will receive an interim response describing what is being done to deal with the matter, and when a full reply can be expected and from whom.

Stage 3

If you feel that it is not appropriate to raise the matter internally within the Ulster College of Music's management structure or that the whistleblowing concern has not been adequately resolved under Stages 1 or 2, you may then decide to raise the matter externally to one of the 'prescribed persons' listed in the legislation cited below. The matter may then be looked into by prescribed persons where recommendations may then be given to the Ulster College of Music as to how the problems may be rectified and in some cases enforcement action may be taken.

Raising a concern externally, to a 'prescribed person'

Individuals who are concerned about wrongdoing or failures can make disclosures to a person or body which has been prescribed by the Public Interest (Disclosure Prescribed Persons) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014. It will be a protected disclosure to such persons or bodies provided you reasonably believe the information and allegation is substantially true and that it is being made to the right prescribed person.

A full list of 'prescribed persons' may be found within the legislation cited above, however examples of some of those are listed below:

Department of the Environment
Department for Social Development
Financial Conduct Authority
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
Information Commissioner
Northern Ireland District Councils
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission
Pensions Regulator
The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland