



Council Policy Manual

SERVICE AND COMMUNICATION

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Service and Communication

Objectives

This policy will:

- a) set forth and outline the commitment of Council to quality service and effective communication,
- b) outline a programme for improving service and improving communication between Council and the local community,
- c) specifically outline the commitments of Council regarding communication and standards of service, and
- d) outline what are the responsibilities of members of the local community in their dealings with the Council.

Definitions

"Customers" includes all customers, whether internal or external.

Nominated contractors are those whose contracts necessitate their working at Council offices, using Council's facilities and operating in a similar manner to staff

Customer Complaint

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a decision, level or quality of service provided by Council, or behaviour of a Council employee or agent, which can be investigated and acted upon. This is distinct from a request for service, however a request for service may develop into a complaint where the provision or timeliness of the service is considered unsatisfactory.

Complaints lodged about decisions made within a structured process are not treated as 'complaints' for the purposes of the complaints management process described in this document. A structured process is where legislation specifically provides for an appeal, or an internal or external review of a decision.

Complaints, as referred to in the formal complaints management process, **do not** include:

- A request for service (unless there was no response to a first request for service)
- A request for information or an explanation of a policy or procedure
- Disagreement with a Council policy
- Reports of damaged or faulty infrastructure



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Commitment to service and communication

Council is committed to providing quality service to the local community in order to meet the needs of the local community using the available resources. To demonstrate this commitment, Council will build and maintain a relationship based on open and effective communication with the local community.

Council is committed to better understanding the needs and expectations of the local community. Council will enhance its understanding of the needs and expectations of the local community by:

- a) maintaining opportunities for feedback by encouraging the public to submit comments and suggestions that Council will record and analyse,
- b) maintaining a complaint handling system to respond to service failures and unsatisfied expectations and to enable Council to identify and rectify service failures,
- c) establish Customer Service Levels in a number of areas and regularly measure the performance of Council against these levels,
- d) continuing to deliver information on the activities of Council through a variety of means. This will include regular media releases, publishing community information in local newspapers and on the Council website, placing on exhibition at the Administration Building plans and other documents relating to Council activities and, using public meetings and other open forms of consultation and dialogue where appropriate,
- e) maintaining accessibility to documents and Registers whereby members of the public can inspect these documents or registers by prior arrangement (subject to the fees and conditions detailed in the policy and subject to Council's duties of confidentiality and privacy), and
- f) continuing to encourage input from the community on Council's activities through a variety of means including encouraging the local community to attend and speak at Committee and Working Party meetings, encouraging the local community to contact Councillors to discuss concerns and encouraging submissions on plans and other documents relating to Council activities.

Provisions

- a) External Customers
All those seeking assistance from Council will be accorded a high level of service regardless of the manner in which the assistance is sought.
- b) Internal Customers
Staff will give each other the same level of service as that provided to our external customers, as it is important that internal standards support the external service delivery.



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- c) **Courtesy**
Courtesy will be shown in all circumstances, even in difficult situations where the customer does not show similar courtesy in return. Staff will be courteous in their spoken words, body language and demeanour.
- d) **Accuracy**
Where there is any doubt about the accuracy of any information, the details will be checked and validated prior to release.
- e) **Accountability**
Staff will look for ways to enhance the quality of service they deliver. Concerns about the quality of service will be referred to the next level of management.
- f) **Integrity**
Staff will act with integrity in all their dealings with both external and internal customers.
- g) **Continuous Improvement**
Impediments to good customer service, when identified, will be addressed. Examples might include reviewing procedures, documentation, etc.
- h) **Training**
Training will be provided on customer service and general communication skills on a needs basis.

General guarantee of service

Council guarantees to:

- a) take major decisions affecting the local community only after due consultation with the local community,
- b) treat members of the local community with courtesy, patience, sensitivity and attentiveness,
- c) provide the local community with advice and other information that is clear and concise,
- d) be sensitive to any language or other communication difficulties experienced by members of the local community when providing advice and other information,
- e) adopt fair, lawful and appropriate procedures when making decisions, carrying out activities and performing services,
- f) make decisions using processes that are impartial and otherwise ethical,
- g) use information and Council resources responsibly and efficiently, and
- h) act in accordance with the law, Council's code of conduct and the code of meeting practice.



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Specified levels of service

1. Answering correspondence

Council recognises the importance of correspondence (including letters, facsimiles and email messages) and will try to provide a clear and concise response promptly.

Council will:

- a) provide a substantive response or at least an interim reply within two weeks,
- b) respond to correspondence by telephone where appropriate (such as simple requests and correspondence for information only) and record the response,
- c) keep the writer informed if a final reply couldn't be provided within the time allowed,
- d) ensure all correspondence includes the name and contact details of the officer dealing with the matter and Council's file reference, and
- e) use language that is clear and concise.

2. Telephone calls

Council recognises the importance of telephone calls and all staff will take responsibility to answer them promptly, quickly refer calls to the appropriate officer and provide clear and concise information in response to caller inquiries.

Council will:

- a) answer calls within six rings either in person or by automatic telephone answering service,
- b) advise the caller on answering of the name of the officer answering,
- c) deal with the call, redirect the call or take a clear message as appropriate,
- d) ensure messages include details of the caller's name and number, the caller's message and details of who took the message and when,
- e) if the call cannot be fully responded to, give clear advice on what has to be done to respond to the call fully and how long that will take,
- f) put calls on hold for no longer than one minute at a time (or such other time as is reasonable having regard to Council's resources),
- g) speak clearly and deal with callers calmly, courteously and patiently even where callers are angry,
- h) record all significant telephone calls in the form of a written file note,



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- i) record all requests for service or notifications of defects (e.g. potholes, signs, vandalism) in the Customer Request Management Systems that are established to record and manage the response to these requests in the organisation.
- j) answer unattended telephones in the absence of the responsible officer,
- k) return telephone messages within one business day when an officer is unavailable
- l) where voice mail services are utilised the officer will respond to messages within one business day.

3. Availability of staff at counter for interviews (Face to Face)

Council recognises the need to promptly serve members of the public who come to Council to seek information and transact other business. The Council Administration Building is an accessible building. Council provides a Customer Service Help Desk where the public can obtain information and be directed to the appropriate area where they can transact business or obtain further information. Council will:

- a) attend to members of the public at customer service desks promptly,
- b) promptly advise staff if there is a member of the public in the reception areas for an appointment,
- c) make staff available for interviews by prior arrangement and otherwise during Council's hours of business which are currently from 9.00 am to 4.30 pm Monday to Friday.
- d) if staff cannot attend interviews on request, attempt to arrange a mutually convenient appointment in the future,
- e) provide a full range of information for public inspection at the Customer Service Help Desk area or on the Council website including:
 - i. a schedule of all registers and documents that are publicly available,
 - ii. relevant Council policies and plans (including details of Council's complaints policy),
 - iii. community information brochures and newsletters,
 - iv. Agendas and business papers,
 - v. information on the NSW Ombudsman and the ICAC, and
 - vi. development applications, tenders and other information on public exhibition.



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- f) speak clearly and deal with visitors calmly, courteously and patiently even where visitors are angry,

4. Addressing meetings of the Council

The Council meeting is the peak decision-making forum of Council. Council values the input of members of the public in consideration of issues determined by Council. Council guarantees to:

- a) publicise the time and date of meetings of Council and Council committees as per Council's obligations under the *Local Government Act*,
- b) make agendas and business papers available to interested persons prior to meetings as per Council's obligations under the *Local Government Act*,
- c) With changes to the Council's Code of Meeting Practice and legislative requirements for the conduct of Council meetings, the Council may hold a public forum prior to each Ordinary Meeting of the Council for the purpose of hearing oral submissions from members of the public on items of business to be considered at the meeting. Public forums may also be held prior to Extraordinary Council Meetings and Meetings of Committees of the Council.
- d) Members of the public may only address Council with respect to a matter that is on the Council agenda at a public forum prior to the commencement of the Council Meeting. Applications to speak at the public forum must be received by the General Manager no less than two days before the date on which the public forum is to be held. They must identify the item of business on the agenda of the Council Meeting the person wishes to speak on, and whether they wish to speak 'for' or 'against' the item.
- e) take into account insofar as they are relevant the points of view expressed by members of the public on issues for decision,
- f) make available details of the address and telephone number (and, if relevant, the contact hours) of each Councillor to members of the public wanting to present their views to Councillors directly, and
- g) endeavour to provide Councillors in a timely fashion with submissions and other information provided by members of the public for the consideration of Councillors.



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5. Notification and consultation

Council recognises that a fundamental component of quality service and improved communication is effective notification and consultation with the local community. Council recognises that the local community is entitled to be notified of proposals that affect or might reasonably be seen as likely to affect their interests and to have their attitudes, concerns and needs acknowledged and taken into account. Council will:

- a) comply with all legal requirements in relation to notification (including the obligations under the *Brewarrina Local Environmental Plan 2012*,
- b) publish details of development applications in the Council Column (subject to obligations under the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*),
- c) provide persons notified with information on how to best frame submissions,
- d) meet Council's obligations under the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*, including informing persons notified that submissions may be obtained by members of the public under the *Local Government Act 1993* and/or the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*
- e) letters of notification include the full name and the direct telephone number of the officer responsible for the application and information on how to obtain further information on the matter,
- f) in relation to issues of significant community or public interest or where the issue is likely to materially adversely affect the interests of a significant number of members of the community, to undertake consultation irrespective of any legal or policy requirement to do so,
- g) ensure that consultation is timely and appropriate but does not unduly delay the decision making progress, and
- h) provide access to documents and registers consistent with Council's legal obligations under the *Local Government Act 1993*, the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009* and the *Privacy and Personal Information Act 1998*.

6. Complaint and Request handling and reviewing decisions

Council values the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between Council and the local community. Council will:

- a) handle promptly telephone and counter requests/complaints and where information is not readily available, verbal enquires will be answered within four (4) working days,
- b) encourage members of the public dissatisfied with Council's conduct to lodge complaints with senior management (and facilitate such action by making complaint and feedback forms freely available in public areas of Council's offices),



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- c) ensure that complainants who are dissatisfied with the outcome of their complaint and remain dissatisfied are offered a review by a more senior officer,
- d) advise complainants of their right to complain to the Ombudsman, (if the matter related to pecuniary interest issues or alleges a serious breakdown in Council operations) the Department of Local Government or (if there are reasonable grounds to suspect corrupt conduct), the ICAC,
- e) deal with protected disclosures in accordance with its internal reporting policy.

7. Using alternative dispute resolution methods

Council is committed to the efficient use of its resources. Disputes involving Council are capable of draining substantial amounts of Council's human and financial resources. Council recognises the capacity of alternative dispute resolution methods to assist parties in dispute to identify their interests and resolve their disputes quickly and at a fraction of the cost of formal legal action.

Council will endeavour to resolve quickly and fairly disputes in which it is involved, utilising alternative dispute resolution methods whenever appropriate. Council will:

- a) ensure appropriate staff members undertake training in alternative resolution methods,
- b) use alternative dispute resolution methods to assist members of the community in dispute over development applications to resolve their disputes,
- c) support alternative dispute resolution methods to assist in the resolution of disputes to which Council is a party, and
- d) provide Council representatives at mediation session with adequate authority to settle disputes the subject of mediation.

Dealing with Difficult Customers

As stated in other areas of this policy, Council staff are expected to treat customers with courtesy and respect at all times and to make every reasonable effort to address the customer's needs even when he or she is rude or difficult.

It is accepted that whatever standard of professional and positive customer service Council achieves, there will always be a small percentage of customers whose issues cannot be dealt with to their satisfaction. This may be due to refusal by the customer to accept a Council decision, demands placed on Council which are not within our scope or resources to meet, or a level of rudeness or aggression shown to staff by the customer that make it unsafe or unreasonable to proceed.



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Where the General Manager is satisfied that every effort has been made by staff to address a customer's needs, he/she may make a decision that there is no reasonable prospect of reaching a position where particular customer is satisfied with Council's actions and service. In such a case the General Manager may decide to stop or limit responses to the customer in relation to the issue in question. This may include:

- a) Refusal to accept telephone calls or make appointments with the customer;
- b) A request that all future communication be in writing;
- c) Provision of responses to queries, information requests only where a new issue has been presented;
- d) Identification of a single staff member as contact person through whom all communication must occur

Where the General Manager has made such a decision, he/she will ensure that this is communicated in writing to the customer and that the customer is given the opportunity to make representation to Council about the proposed course of action. In addition the General Manager will advise Councillors of any correspondence issued in relation to such a decision. The General Manager will continue to monitor any further contact with the customer over the issue.

Rude, abusive or aggressive behaviour may include rude or otherwise vulgar noises, expressions or gestures, verbal abuse of a personal or general nature, intimidating, threatening or offensive behaviour, physical violence against property or physical violence against a person.

If in the opinion of any staff member, rude, abusive or aggressive comments or statements are made in telephone conversations or interviews, the staff member may:

- a) Warn the caller that if the behaviour continues, the conversation or interview will be terminated
- b) Terminate the conversation or interview if the rude, abusive or aggressive behaviour continues after a warning has been given.

Where a conversation or interview is terminated, the staff member must then inform his/her Supervisor of the incident and prepare a report to be registered in the Records Management System of the event. Where appropriate, the Supervisor will then discuss the matter with the General Manager to determine what action should be taken with respect to the customer's behaviour.

If, in the opinion of the General Manager, any correspondence to Council contains personal abuse, inflammatory statements or material clearly intended to intimidate, it will be placed on the relevant file and not otherwise acted upon.



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Responsibility / Accountability

Each member of staff and/or nominated contractor is:

- a) Accountable for the quality of service they deliver;
- b) Responsible for identifying and reporting any impediments to delivery of good customer service;
- c) Management is responsible for acting upon any identified impediments to the delivery of good customer service.

What are the responsibilities of members of the local community?

Communication is a two-way process. To be effective, both Council and the public should strive to adopt a fair and reasonable approach to communicating with each other. When communicating with Council, members of the public will as far as possible in the circumstances:

- a) their dissatisfaction on the conduct or performance of Council, Councillors and/or staff members rather than on personal criticism of Councillors and/or staff,
- b) behave appropriately, avoiding the excessive use of abusive language and/or threatening behaviour,
- c) provide Council with all the relevant information in order that their opinion, concern or complaint can be readily understood,
- d) accept that Council operates under resource constraints, noting that the allocation of resources is a matter for Council to determine, and
- e) pursue alternative means of resolving complaints and disputes through external agencies, publicity and/or taking legal action if the complaint or dispute cannot be resolved to their satisfaction.