



CUSTOMER SERVICE AND COMMUNICATION POLICY

Adopted: 25 May 2014

TRIM 129277.2014



CUSTOMER SERVICE AND COMMUNICATION POLICY

1. PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

This policy aims to set out:

- A program for the continuous improvement of service and communication between Council and the community
- The commitment of Council to the maintenance and further development of effective communication with, and the provision of a high standard of service for, the local community
- The responsibilities of members of the community in their dealings with Council.

2. LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS

Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979

Local Government Act 1993

Ombudsman Act 1974

Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998

Public Interest Disclosures Act 1993

Work Health and Safety Act 2011

3. DEFINITIONS

Council: Liverpool City Council

Customer: refers to both external customers including residents, ratepayers, developers and visitors, and to internal customers e.g. members of Council staff, the Mayor and Councillors.

ICAC: Independent Commission Against Corruption

4. POLICY STATEMENT

4.1 Commitment to service and communication

4.1.1 Council is committed to providing quality service to the community in order to meet their needs using the available resources. To demonstrate this commitment, Council seeks to build and to maintain a relationship based on open and effective communication with the community. Council offers several service methods:

- Email: lcc@liverpool.nsw.gov.au
- Fax: 9821 9333
- In person: Customer Service Centre, level 2, 33 Moore Street Liverpool (Monday-Friday 8.30am to 5.00pm)
- Post: Locked Bag 7064 Liverpool BC 1871
- Telephone: 1300 36 2170 (NSW residents)
(02) 9821 9222 (interstate calls)
133677(National relay service for hearing/speech impaired customers).

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4.1.2 Council is committed to better understanding the needs and expectations of the community and will do so by:

- Carrying out periodic community surveys to learn about what the community thinks about the areas where Council is performing well and the areas where Council needs to improve service
- Consulting with representatives of the community to create an ongoing dialogue between Council and the community about its service, improving its services and issues of public interest
- Continuing to provide information about Council activities through a variety of means, including publishing regular community updates, publishing community information in local newspapers and on the Council website, placing on exhibition plans and other documents relating to Council activities at Council offices and libraries, and using public meetings and other open forms of consultation and dialogue where appropriate, including referring matters to any appropriate committee
- Continuing to encourage input from the community on Council's activities through a variety of means, including provision for the community to attend and speak at Council meetings, the ability to contact Councillors to discuss concerns, publicising Council's complaint handling and feedback systems and giving full consideration to submissions on plans and other documents relating to Council activities.
- Establishing levels of service in a number of areas and regularly measuring the performance of Council against these levels of service
- Maintaining a complaint handling system to respond to service failures and dissatisfaction
- Maintaining an agency information guide so that members of the public can inspect files by prior arrangement, subject to the fees and conditions detailed in the policy and subject to Council's duties of confidentiality and privacy
- Maintaining opportunities for feedback by encouraging the public to complete feedback forms that Council will record and analyse.

4.3 Council's general levels of service

4.3.1 Council is committed to:

- Adopting clear and consistent policies and procedures, making decisions using processes that are fair, impartial and reasonable, using information and Council resources responsibly and efficiently, and acting in accordance with legislation, Council's Code of Conduct and other Council policies.
- Being aware of the multicultural nature of the community and any language or other communication barriers experienced by members of the community when providing advice and other information, seeking feedback and consulting and taking appropriate action, through use of language aides and interpreter services and other methods
- Providing the community with advice and other information that is clear and concise
- Treating members of the community with courtesy, patience, sensitivity and attentiveness.

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4.4 Council's specific levels of service

4.4.1 **Answering correspondence**

Council recognises the importance of correspondence such as letters, faxes and email messages and tries to provide clear and concise responses promptly.

Council is committed to:

- Acknowledging correspondence or providing an interim reply, where appropriate, within one week of the receipt of any correspondence by Council
- Providing a substantive response within two weeks in the case of simple inquiries and within four weeks in the case of more complex inquiries
- Keeping the writer informed if a final reply cannot be provided within the time allowed
- Responding to correspondence by telephone, such as simple requests and correspondence for information only, and recording the response
- Ensuring all correspondence includes the name and contact details of the Council staff member dealing with the matter and Council's file reference
- Using plain and simple language.

4.4.2 **Telephone calls**

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

Council is committed to:

- Answering calls within five rings, wherever possible
- Speaking clearly and dealing with callers calmly, courteously and patiently
- Informing the caller, on answering a call, of the name and work unit of the Council staff member answering the call
- Dealing with calls, redirecting calls or taking clear messages, as appropriate
- If redirecting the call, ensuring that the Council staff member to whom the call is being redirected is available and that the caller's details are announced
- Answering unattended telephones in the absence of the responsible officer
- Ensuring that messages taken include details of the caller's name and number, the caller's message and details of the timing of the call and the person who took the call
- If the call cannot be fully responded to, giving clear advice on what has to be done to respond to the call fully and how long that response is likely to take
- Recording all significant telephone calls in the form of a written file note
- Returning telephone messages, as soon as possible and not more than one business day after any call is received by Council.

4.4.3 **Availability of Council staff at customer service counters and for interviews**

Council recognises the need for prompt service of members of the public who come to Council to seek information and transact other business. Council provides customer service counters where the public can obtain information and transact business. Council accommodates interviews by appointment and tries to ensure that the appropriate Council officers are available.

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Council is committed to:

- Attending quickly and efficiently to members of the public at customer service counters
- Promptly informing the relevant Council staff member when a member of the public is present at a customer service counter for an appointment
- Providing convenient access to all information that is available for public inspection
- Speaking clearly and dealing with visitors calmly, courteously and patiently.
- Making Council staff available for interviews by prior arrangement and otherwise during Council's hours of business
- If Council staff cannot attend interviews on request, attempting to arrange a mutually convenient appointment in the future.

4.4.4 **Customer service requests**

Council is committed to:

- Entering customer requests immediately, wherever possible
- Obtaining proper contact details, including customers' names, addresses and phone numbers
- Obtaining sufficient information from each customer, relevant to the customer request
- Giving each customer a customer request number and response time, wherever possible
- Referring customer requests to the appropriate Council staff members
- Reallocating a customer request to the relevant Council staff member promptly, if it was initially allocated incorrectly
- Providing a substantive and correct response on each customer request
- Contacting a customer, wherever applicable, informing the particular customer of the relevant action taken by Council
- Updating the status on any customer request appropriately and only finalising the customer request when work has been completed by Council
- Actioning a customer request within the specified timeframe of the request type

4.4.5 **Customers wishing to attend and speak at Council meetings**

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

Council is committed to:

- Endeavouring to provide Councillors, in a timely fashion, with submissions and other information provided by members of the public for the consideration of Councillors
- Making agendas and business papers available to interested persons prior to meetings pursuant to Council's obligations under the *Local Government Act 1993* and the Code of Meeting Practice
- Making contact details available to members of the public wishing to present their views to Councillors directly, as agreed upon by each Councillor, including telephone number and, where relevant, the contact hours for each Councillor
- Providing opportunities for members of the public to speak at meetings of Council and Council committees, as set out in the Code of Meeting Practice

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- Providing members of the public requesting to speak during the Public Forum at Council meetings with the necessary request form and relevant information about the running of Council meetings
- Publicising the time and date of meetings of Council and Council committees pursuant to Council's obligations under the *Local Government Act 1993* and the Code of Meeting Practice
- Taking into account any relevant points of view expressed by members of the public on issues for decision by Council.

4.4.6 **Communication with the local community**

Council is committed to ensuring that members of the local community are informed about proposed Council actions, policies and plans that may affect them. In particular, Council seeks to:

- Comply with all legal requirements in relation to notification, including, where relevant, Council's obligations under the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* and its associated Regulation, the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* and Council's planning instruments
- Ensure letters of notification include the full name and the direct telephone number of the member of Council staff who is responsible for handling the relevant application and information on how to obtain further information on the matter
- Ensure that consultation is timely and appropriate but does not unduly delay the decision-making process
- Ensure that information is available for inspection and that Council staff are available for consultation in relation to matters that are the subject of notification and consultation
- 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 the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*
- Provide persons notified with information in relation to submissions
- Provide access to Council files 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 Protection Act 1998*
- Publish details of all development applications in local newspapers and on Council's website, subject to Council's obligations under the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998*
- Undertake consultation, irrespective of any legal or policy requirement to do so, in relation to issues of significant community or public interest or if the issue is likely to adversely affect the interests of a significant number of members of the community

4.4.7 **Complaints and compliments**

Council values the opportunity that complaints and compliments provide to Council in identifying areas of service that are working well and those which need improvement so as to strengthen the relationship between Council and the community.

Council is committed to dealing with all complaints and compliments received by Council in accordance with Council's Customer Complaints and Compliments Policy.

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4.5 What are the responsibilities of members of the community in dealing with Council?

4.5.1 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:

- Behave appropriately, avoiding the use of abusive language and/or threatening behaviour,
- Focus their dissatisfaction on the conduct or performance of Council, Councillors and/or Council staff members, rather than on personal criticism of Councillors and/or Council staff
- Provide Council with all relevant information in order that their opinion, concern or complaint can be readily understood
- Pursue alternative means of resolving complaints and disputes through external agencies, if the complaint or dispute cannot be resolved to their satisfaction
- Understand that Council operates under resource constraints, noting that the allocation of resources is a matter for Council to determine
- Use the methods of service delivery outlined in clause 4.1 above.

4.6 What if Council does not honour its commitments?

4.6.1 Any member of the public who believes that Council has failed to honour the commitments set out in this policy should raise the matter with Council in the form of a complaint. Council will investigate the complaint and advise the complainant of the outcome in a reasonable time.

4.6.2 Complaints are to be dealt with in accordance with Council's Customer Complaints and Compliments Policy.

4.6.3 If a complaint is deemed to be justified, Council tries to explain the problem and what Council is doing to resolve the matter.

4.6.4 If a complainant remains dissatisfied, the complainant can seek a review. Alternatively, the complainant can complain to an appropriate such as the NSW Ombudsman, ICAC or the Division of Local Government.

4.7 Putting limits on services by and communication with Council

4.7.1 Council accepts and values complaints and criticism of Council's performance. Council also understands and accepts that some members of the public may experience frustration, from time to time, arising from dissatisfaction with Council services.

4.7.2 In some circumstances, Council may consider placing limits on communication between certain members of the public and Council. These limits apply if a particular member of the public becomes abusive of Councillors or members of Council staff, or makes excessive demands upon Council staff and resources. These limits are imposed in the interest of responsible management of Council's limited resources and to fulfil Council's work health and safety obligations as a responsible employer.

4.7.3 These limits are only applied as a result of a determination by the Chief Executive Officer or a member of Council staff with appropriate delegated authority, in serious cases of inappropriate conduct and, only if the person concerned has first been warned about the consequences of persisting with the identified inappropriate conduct. Council

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will then set out these limits in writing and include a statement of reasons for their imposition.

4.7.4 Council does not impose unconditional limits on communication between Council and any member of the public. Council will keep an accurate record of any limits imposed and will, upon request; review the limits, after decision of Council, following the expiration of a period of three months.

4.8 Customers who cannot be satisfied or who make unreasonable demands

4.8.1 Customers who cannot be satisfied, include members of the public or groups who do not accept that Council is unable to assist them, or that Council can provide any further assistance or level of service than that which has been provided already and/or who disagree with the action Council has taken in relation to their complaint or concern.

4.8.2 Customers who make unreasonable demands include members of the public whose demands upon Council start to divert Council's resources, significantly and unreasonably, away from other Council functions or create an inequitable and unfair reduction of resources or staff time for other customers. Such demands may result from the amount of information requested, the nature or scale of services sought or the excessive number of approaches seeking information, assistance or service.

4.8.3 If in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer or the Chief Executive Officer's delegate, a customer cannot be satisfied or makes unreasonable demands, and all appropriate avenues of internal review or appeal have been exhausted and the customer continues to write to, telephone and/or visit Council, the following actions may be taken:

- The Chief Executive Officer/delegate is to brief Councillors about the contents of any correspondence issued in accordance with this clause.
- The Chief Executive Officer/delegate may write to the customer restating Council's position on the matter, if necessary, and informing them that, if the customer continues to contact Council regarding the matter, Council may:
 - I. Not accept any further phone calls and/or emails from the customer
 - ii. Not grant any further interviews
 - iii. Require all further communication to be put in writing, excluding email
 - iv. Continue to receive, to read and to file correspondence but only to acknowledge or otherwise respond to it if:
 - the customer provides significant new information relating to their complaint or concern; or
 - the customer raises new issues, which in the Chief Executive Officer's/delegate's opinion, warrant fresh action
- The customer is to be given an opportunity to make representations about Council's proposed course of action
- If the customer continues to contact Council after being advised of Council's proposed course of action, the Chief Executive Officer/delegate may, after considering any representations from the customer, advise the customer that any or all of the restrictions in this clause of Council's policy will now apply.

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4.9 Customers who constantly raise the same issue with different Council staff members

4.9.1 If in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer/delegate, a customer is constantly raising the same issues with different members of Council staff, the following actions may be taken:

- The Chief Executive Officer/delegate is to brief Councillors about the contents of any notification issued in accordance with this clause
- The Chief Executive Officer/delegate may notify the customer that:
 - I. Only a nominated staff member must deal with them in future
 - II. They must make an appointment with that person if they wish to discuss their matter; or
 - III. All future contact with Council must be in writing.
- The customer is to be given an opportunity to make representations about Council's proposed course of action.

4.10 Customers who behave in a rude, abusive or aggressive manner

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

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

- Warn the customer that if the behaviour continues, the conversation or interview will be terminated
- Terminate the conversation or interview if the rude, abusive or aggressive behaviour continues after a warning has been given
- If the customer continues to give verbal abuse and/or threatens physical abuse, the Chief Executive Officer/delegate or the relevant manager may inform the customer that they are to be removed from the building
- If a conversation or interview is terminated in accordance with this clause, the Council staff member must notify the Chief Executive Officer/delegate or the relevant manager of the details as soon as possible.

4.11 General

4.11.1 Many of the types of behaviour set out in clauses 4.16-4.25 above may constitute harassment. If a member of the public, member of Council staff or a Councillor believes they have been discriminated against or harassed, while conducting business with Council or assisting a member of the public to conduct business with Council, they have a legal right to complain to the Anti Discrimination Board of NSW.

4.11.2 If in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer/delegate, any correspondence to Council contains personal abuse, inflammatory statements, or material clearly intended to intimidate, it must be returned to the sender and not otherwise acted upon.

4.11.3 In regard to all of the situations referred to in this policy, adequate documentary records must be made and maintained on the appropriate Council file.

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4.11.4 If the Chief Executive Officer/delegate determines to limit a customer's access to Council, in any of the ways specified in this policy, the Chief Executive Officer/delegate must inform Council, as soon as possible, about the relevant circumstances and the action taken. This advice, as appropriate, should be forwarded to the Division of Local Government, ICAC and the NSW Ombudsman for information.

4.12 Legal action

4.12.1 Despite its commitment to quality service and improved communication, there may be situations when conflict between Council, including members of Council staff and Councillors, and members of the public may escalate to the point where parties resort to legal action.

4.12.2 Council is committed to improve service and communication with the community, the speedy and cost effective resolution of disputes involving Council and to minimise any impact on the rights of members of the public to participate in the affairs of Council. Council also considers that legal action should be considered only when all other reasonable and appropriate alternatives to resolving disputes have been attempted.

4.12.3 To this end, Council seeks to encourage and to assist the parties to resolve these disputes through other means including, where appropriate, engaging appropriate external mediators. In the case of action taken against Council, Councillors and/or members Council staff, Council may contribute towards the cost of any mediation or defending any legal action upon the resolution of Council.

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AUTHORISED BY

Council Resolution 25 May 2014

EFFECTIVE FROM

25 May 2014

DEPARTMENT RESPONSIBLE

Community and Culture (Customer Service)

REVIEW DATE

25 May 2016

THIS POLICY HAS BEEN DEVELOPED AFTER CONSULTATION WITH

Corporate Service (Governance and Legal Services)

VERSIONS

Version	Amended by	Date	TRIM Number
1	Council Resolution	9 December 2002	Not applicable
1	Council Resolution	14 July 2003	Not applicable
2	Council Resolution	17 October 2005	046063.2005
4	Council Resolution	19 July 2010	211613.2010
5	Council Resolution	25 May 2014	129277.2014

REFERENCES

Liverpool City Council: Code of Conduct

Liverpool City Council: Code of Meeting Practice

Liverpool City Council: Customer Feedback Policy

Mosman Council: Complaints Handling Policy

NSW Ombudsman: Better Service and Communication for Council 2000

NSW Ombudsman and Department of Local Government: Complaints Management in Councils, revised 2009

NSW Ombudsman: Effective Complaint Handling Guidelines 2nd edition, 2010

NSW Ombudsman: Good Conduct and Administrative Practice Guidelines for State and Local Government 2nd edition, 2010

NSW Ombudsman: Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Manual 2012

NSW Ombudsman: The Complaint Handlers Toolkit 2000

NSW Ombudsman: Unreasonable Complaint Conduct – Model Policy 2012

Parramatta City Council: Customers Compliments and Complaints Policy

Penrith City Council: Customer Charter

Strathfield Council: Complaints Handling Policy