

	<p>Customer Service, Complaints & Request for Service Policy Policy No. ADMPOL 05</p>	Version No:	1.0
		Responsible Officer/s	Deputy CEO
		Issued:	18 November 2013
		Next Review:	Oct 2019

1. Purpose

Local Government provides an extensive range of services and infrastructure to communities, and discharges obligations under many pieces of legislation.

The District Council of Grant is committed to providing quality services to our community. We are continually striving to improve our services through employee and volunteer training, implementation of new technology and consultation. This Policy outlines our commitment to customers in accordance with our Strategic Plan and the standards customers can expect when dealing with Council. The aim of this Policy is to:

- Provide quality service to customers fairly and efficiently
- Provide a fair, consistent and structured process for Council's customers if they are dissatisfied with a Council action, decision or service
- provide guidance on what may constitute a reasonable request for a service or an improvement to a service
- distinguish between requests, complaints and feedback to Council and give direction on management of requests
- provide a standardised process for assessing and processing requests

2. Scope

This policy applies to all employees, contractors, subcontractors, volunteers, Councillors and representatives of the District Council of Grant and all areas of Council activity.

3. Out of Scope

Complaints which are determined to be about matters that are not Council's responsibility, such as disputes between neighbours, will not be handled under this policy and the customer will be advised of this.

4. Definitions

Business Day means a day when the Council is normally open for business, i.e. Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

Complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with a product or service delivered by Council, or its representatives, that has failed to reach the standard stated, implied or expected. This includes complaints about a service that has been, or should have been delivered.

Council refers to the District Council of Grant

Customer is defined as any person, external and internal to this organisation, who approaches Councillors, employees, apprentices, trainees and contractors of the District Council of Grant with a request for information or services.

Customer Service is defined as the direct provision of information or services to customers. This includes assisting our customers to identify others within our community that may be able to meet the needs of our citizens.

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District Council of Grant Customer Service Charter is a document that details the Council's commitment to delivering excellence in customer service to the community. This document clearly states the organisation's mission as well as customer service deliverables established by the Council. This document is referred to hereafter as the Charter.

Employee includes a person employed directly by Council in a full time, part time or casual capacity (whether that position is permanent or contractual) and persons providing services to, or on behalf of the Council even though they may be employed by another party.

Feedback can take the form of comments, both positive and negative, about services provided by Council without necessarily requiring a corrective action, change of services or formal review of a decision. Feedback may, however, influence future service reviews and delivery methods.

Request for Service is an application to have Council or, its representative, take some form of action to provide or improve a Council service.

5. Policy

5.1 Service Standards

The District Council of Grant is committed to providing our customers with quality, courteous, informative and timely service that meets or exceeds their expectations. Specifically, Council is committed to the following customer service standards:

- Providing excellent standards of customer service in a professional manner;
- Listening and responding appropriately to customer needs in a timely manner;
- Treating customers courteously and with respect;
- Providing a helpful and friendly service experience;
- Ensuring that all our services are easy to access and inclusive;
- Providing accurate information;
- Sustaining a process of continuous improvement in service quality; and
- Ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

This commitment will be carried out around the considerations of fairness, equity, available resources, Council policy and legislation.

5.2 Customer Charter

A Customer Charter will be developed under this Policy, setting out what customers can expect when they make contact with the District Council of Grant. It will include contact details for the Council and response timeframes. The Customer Charter will be prepared as a brochure to enable wide distribution to District Council of Grant customers and will be available from the Council website www.dcgrant.sa.gov.au or in printed form at Council offices.

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5.3 Request for Service

This policy is based on five principles, which will be fundamental in the way Council approaches requests for service. They are:

- Fairness: treating customers fairly requires impartiality, confidentiality and transparency at all stages of the process
- Accessibility: to be accessible there must be broad public awareness about Council's policy and a range of contact options
- Responsiveness: this will be achieved by providing sufficient resources, well trained staff and review and improvement of the systems
- Efficiency: customer requests will be dealt with as quickly as practical while adhering to this policy
- Integration of different areas of Council where the customer request overlaps functional responsibilities

In processing requests for service emphasis will be placed on:

- Public safety and emergencies
- Fulfilling Council's strategic and business plans
- Using Council resources effectively and efficiently;

Requests for service will be assessed in the context of the services and work provided for in the Council's annual business plan and budget.

5.3.1 Reasonable Request for Service

In determining how to respond to a request for service Council will consider:-

- An assessment of risk
- Statutory responsibilities
- The content of Council's Strategic Management Plans, Annual Business Plans, Annual Works Program and Annual Budget
- Relevant Council policies and codes
- Established service standards and response times for regular Council activities

5.3.2 Processing a Request for Service

Council aims to manage requests efficiently and effectively and in accordance with Council's Request for Service procedure.

5.3.3 Timeframes for Response

The Request for Services Procedure provides details on the timeframes for response to requests for service.

In the majority of cases requests will be processed promptly and the applicant advised verbally or by return post/email.

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5.3.4 Recording Requests for Service

Requests will be recorded in Council's records management system in such a way that the information can also be analysed for service improvement opportunities and as detailed in the Requests for Service Procedure.

5.3.5 Rejected Requests

All rejected requests will be recorded as detailed in the Request for Service Procedure and may be reconsidered at a future date, such as in conjunction with the preparation of Council's Annual Business Plan and associated budget.

5.4 Complaints Regarding Product and Service Delivery of Council

Council commits to complaint handling as a way of improving its services and programs as well as providing an opportunity to rectify issues.

This policy will be made widely accessible to ensure that customers are fully aware of their right to complain. Information about how to lodge a complaint will be placed in a prominent position on Council's website.

Except for minor responses, Council will try to ensure that, whenever possible, complaints will be handled independently of the original decision-maker or officer involved in the matter that is the subject of the complaint.

A person can make a complaint in a number of ways:

- Complete the appropriate form on Council's website
- SMS
- Telephone
- Fax
- Email
- Letter
- Councils Facebook Account
- Visit a Council customer service office.

Complaints will be recorded in Council's records management system in such a way that the information can also be analysed for service improvement opportunities and as detailed in the Complaint Handling Procedure.

Employees will be trained to manage complaints efficiently and effectively, and provided with a level of delegated authority appropriate for the nature of complaints they are expected to resolve.

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5.4.1 Steps of the Complaint Handling Process

The following steps will be followed by staff to ensure complaints are dealt with efficiently and effectively:

- Acknowledge complaints
- Assess the complaint – simple problems may not need to be investigated
- Investigate the complaint
- Respond to the complainant with a clear decision
- Follow up any customer service concerns/corrections
- Consider whether there are systemic issues which need correction.

The Complaint Handling Procedure provides further details of the complaint handling process.

5.4.2 Timeframes for Response

The Complaint Handling Procedure provides detail on the timeframes for response to complaints.

5.4.3 Framework for Resolving Complaints

Complaints may vary greatly in their level of complexity and seriousness. Wherever possible complaints will be resolved when first reported, but if necessary officers will escalate complaint handling as set out below.

The complaints procedure consists of a three tiered scheme:

1. *Immediate response to resolve the complaint*
All staff are empowered to receive **service** complaints in the first instance and it is preferable that they are dealt with promptly at the initial point of contact and at the appropriate officer level.
2. *Complaint escalated to a more senior officer*
A complaint will be directed to a more senior officer in the Council, where circumstances indicate that the complaint would be more appropriately handled at a higher level. This may occur, for example, where an officer has been involved in the matter that is the subject of the complaint, where the complaint is about an issue that requires a decision to be made at a more senior level, or where a complaint concerns a matter that ranges across more than one Council work area.
3. *Internal review of a Council decision by statutory process*
Internal review of a Council decision is available under section 270 of the Local Government Act 1999 [see Council's Internal Review Procedure]. This is a process established by legislation that enables a Council to reconsider all the evidence relied on to make a decision, including new evidence if relevant. This process is generally a last resort in the complaint handling process, but may also be used in situations which are not able to be resolved by other means, such as a complaint about a decision of the CEO.

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While Council prefers to work with its customers to resolve complaints quickly and effectively, a complainant will always retain the right to seek other forms of resolution, such as contacting the Ombudsman, or taking legal action at any time. Note however that as a general rule, the Ombudsman prefers a complaint to be addressed by Council in the first instance, unless this is not appropriate in the circumstances.

5.4.4 Alternative Procedures

There are also other complaint procedures which apply to particular types of complaints. If the complaint would be more properly dealt with by another process this will be explained to the complainant at the outset. For example:

- Complaints against a Councillor or the Chief Executive Officer
- Freedom of Information applications
- Decisions made under legislation other than the *Local Government Act*, such as the *Development Act 1993*, *Expiation of Offences Act 1996* or *Whistleblowers Protection Act 1993*.

In some instances, it may be appropriate to consider mediation, conciliation or neutral evaluation under the Council's scheme authorised by section 271 of the *Local Government Act*. Costs and expenses of the appointment and work of a mediator, conciliator or evaluator will be shared equally between the Council and the other party.

5.4.5 Unreasonable Complainant Conduct

All complaints received by Council will be treated seriously and complainants will be treated courteously. However, occasionally the conduct of a complainant can be unreasonable. This may take the form of unreasonable persistence, unreasonable demands, lack of cooperation, argumentative or threatening behaviour. What can be termed 'unreasonable' will vary depending on a number of factors and Council aims to manage these situations in a fair and equitable manner.

Where a complainant's behaviour consumes an unwarranted amount of Council resources or impedes the investigation of their complaint, a decision may be made to apply restrictions on contact with the person. Before making any decision to restrict contact, the complainant will be warned that, if the specified behaviour(s) or actions continue, restrictions may be applied.

Any decision to suspend action on a complaint or to apply restrictions will be made by the Chief Executive Officer or his/her delegate I and communicated in writing to the complainant.

5.4.6 Using Complaints to Improve Service

Quality of service is an important measure of Council's effectiveness. Learning from complaints is a powerful way of helping to develop the Council and increase trust among the people who use our services.

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In addition to making changes to procedures and practices where appropriate, Council will review and evaluate the information gained through its complaints handling system on an annual basis to identify systemic issues and improvements to service. Council will receive a report on the number and nature of complaints received, including the percentage of unresolved complaints received, including the percentage of unresolved complaints, at least once a year.

Where appropriate, complainants will be provided with an explanation of changes proposed or made as a result of the investigation of their complaint.

5.4.7 Privacy and Confidentiality

Complainants have a right to expect that their complaint will be investigated in private, to the extent possible. The identity of complainants will be made known only to those who need to know in the process of investigating and resolving the complaint. The complaint will not be revealed or made public by the Council, except where required by law.

All complaints lodged with Council are subject to the *Freedom of Information Act 1991* and confidentiality cannot be guaranteed under the provisions of that legislation.

5.4.8 Resolutions

Where complaints are found to be justified Council will, where practicable, remedy the situation in a manner which is consistent and fair for both Council and complainants. The solution chosen will be proportionate and appropriate to the circumstances and shall give consideration to Council's available resources, plans and industrial relations environment.

Claims for compensation shall in all cases be referred to Council's insurer, the Local Government Association Mutual Liability Scheme who shall take any such action as they deem necessary.

5.4.9 Alternative Resolutions

Council may seek to use alternative dispute resolution methods such as mediation to resolve a complaint in circumstances where the Chief Executive Officer or his/her delegate deems such a course of action appropriate and the complainant is amenable to that process.

When advising a complainant of the outcome of an investigation of a complaint, Council will provide information about alternative resolutions, including any rights of appeal and the right to make a complaint to an external agency such as the SA Ombudsman.

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5.5 Complaints Regarding Code of Conduct for Council Employees

Where a person alleges –

- an employee (or a relative of an employee) has sought or received a gift or benefit that is, or could reasonably be taken to be, intended or likely to create a sense of obligation on the part of the employee to a person or to influence the employee in the performance or discharge of the employees functions or duties; or
- an employee has failed to record, or correctly record, details of a gift or benefit received by the employee (or a relative of an employee) on the gift and benefits register; or
- the Chief Executive Officer has not appropriately maintained a register for gifts and benefits received by employees of the Council,

they may submit a complaint alleging that an employee of Council has contravened or failed to comply with the Code of Conduct for Council Employees, as prescribed in Schedule 2A of the *Local Government (General) Regulations 2013*.

A complaint must be given to the Chief Executive Officer (or delegate). In the case of a complaint against the Chief Executive Officer, a complaint must be given to the principal member of the Council, except in circumstances where it would be inappropriate to do so (such as where legislation requires the matter to which the complaint relates to remain confidential).

A complaint will be investigated and resolved according to the industrial and human resource procedures of the Council.

6. Responsibilities

All Council Staff and Elected Members.

7. References:

Local Government Act 1999
 Independent Commissioner Against Corruption Act 2012
 Whistleblowers Protection Act 1993
 Council Complaint Handling Procedure
 Council Requests for Service Procedure
 Elected Member Code of Conduct
 Internal Review of Council Decisions Procedure
 Whistleblowers Policy
 Fraud and Corruption Prevention Policy

8. Review

This Policy shall be reviewed by the District Council of Grant at minimum every four (4) years within 12 months of a general election, (or on significant change to legislation or other matters which could affect this policy).

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Action	Date	Minute Reference
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