

POLICY:-	
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RESPONSIBILITY:-	
Draft Policy developed by:	General Manager
Committee/s (if any) consulted in the development of this Policy:	N/A
Responsibility for Implementation:	Director of Finance and Administration
Responsibility for review of Policy:	Director of Finance and Administration

OBJECTIVE

Upper Lachlan Shire Council strives to deliver standards of customer service at the highest level as reflected in our Community Strategic Plan.

The objective of this policy is to provide guidelines with respect to what Council expects from its employees in their everyday dealings with internal and external customers and ensure Council delivers the customer service as outlined in our Service Commitment Charter that provides a structure around responding to, recording, reporting and using feedback to improve service to customers.

PURPOSE

The Upper Lachlan Shire Council is a service delivery organisation. Employees must, in all of their dealings, maintain respect and courtesy and aim to build cooperative relationships.

DEFINITIONS

“Customer” means both external and internal customers and includes the following:-

- a) Members of the community of Upper Lachlan Shire Council LGA;*
- b) Business interests located within the boundaries of the Council;*
- c) Business interests located outside the boundaries of the Council;*
- d) Users of any service or facility provided by the Council;*
- e) A ratepayer of Upper Lachlan Shire Council;*
- f) Tourists and visitors to the Council area;*
- g) State and Federal Government Departments and Agencies;*
- h) Any member of the public who has an interest in Upper Lachlan Shire Council.*
- i) Councillors representing Upper Lachlan Shire Council;*
- j) Media organisations;*
- k) Non –profit and community service organisations;*
- l) Any employee, volunteer or Committee member working for the Council on a permanent or temporary basis; and*
- m) A consultant or contractor engaged by the Council.*

POLICY

Introduction

This policy sets out to ensure that:-

- All customers are treated fairly and reasonably;
- Consistent and honest practices are used by both Council staff and Councillors when dealing with customers;
- Customer’s enquiries are answered in an efficient and timely manner; and
- Customer safety, and public health and safety, are of paramount importance to Council and action will be taken as expediently as possible.

This policy provides guidance and procedures for Council staff and Councillors in dealing with customers.

SERVICE COMMITMENT CHARTER

Council staff shall strive to meet the needs of our customers in a professional and ethical manner with courteous and efficient service. Staff shall:-

- Treat all customers with courtesy, fairness, dignity and respect;
- Listen attentively to what customers have to say;
- Respond to customers enquiries promptly and efficiently;
- Strive to achieve high standards of professionalism and quality of advice;
- Take responsibility for providing answers to requests, to the best of the staff member's knowledge and skills.
- Be transparent and accountable;
- Demonstrate standards of conduct and ethics that maintain public confidence;
- Be fair, consistent and impartial in administering Council's legal obligations;
- Act with integrity and honesty when liaising with customers;
- Consult customers about service needs;
- Give firm but fair interpretation and application of law and policy when decisions are made on customers applications; and
- Not disclose any information about the customer without the customer's consent, except as permitted by law.

STANDARDS OF SERVICE

Council staff shall strive to respond to correspondence received from customers (written, faxed or emailed) within fifteen (15) working days. An acknowledgement letter shall be sent where investigations are such that more than 15 working days is required to enact a response or a report is required to be placed before a future Council Meeting regarding the issues raised in the correspondence.

Telephone calls to Council's switchboard shall be answered as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Council staff shall answer incoming calls by clearly stating their name and Section/Department. Unanswered calls shall divert to another member of staff or to voice mail.

Council staff making outgoing calls shall identify themselves by name and Council/Department/Section, as appropriate, and shall clearly outline the purpose of the call.

Reception area and customer service centre staff shall greet customers as quickly as possible and in a professional and helpful manner.

Council's Public Officer / Right to Information Officer is available to assist in providing information to the public and provide advice to customers on how they may obtain information or how they may make a complaint to Council.

LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS

Reference should be made to the following legislation, guidelines and policy documents when reading this policy:-

Local Government Act 1993;
Local Government (General) Regulations 2005;
Local Government Amendment (Governance and Planning) Act 2016;
Independent Commission against Corruption Act 1988 and ICAC Guidelines;
Work Health and Safety Act 2011 and Regulations;
Anti Discrimination Act 1977;
Local Government (State) Award 2014;
Fair Work Act 2009;
Equal Employment Opportunity Act 1987;
Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009;
Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998;
Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979;
NSW State Records Act 1998;
Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994;
Industrial Relations / Workplace Surveillance Act 2005;
Ombudsman Better Service and Communication – Guidelines for Local Government;
Ombudsman Unreasonable Complainant Conduct;
Code of Conduct for Councillors, staff, contractors and delegates of Council;
Council Community Strategic Plan;
Council Delivery Program;
Council Operational Plan;
Council Code of Meeting Practice;
Council Code of Business Practice;
Council Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Policy;
Council Interaction between Councillors and Staff Policy;
Council Records Management Policy;
Council Digital Information Security Policy;
Council Privacy Management Plan;
Council Internal Control and Procedures Manual;
Council Purchasing and Acquisition of Goods Policy and Procedures;
Council Payment of Expenses and Provision of Facilities Policy;
Council Bribes, Gifts and Benefits Policy;
Council Complaints Management Policy;
Council Government Information (Public Access) Policy;
Council Fraud and Corruption Prevention Policy;
Council Public Access Policy;
Council Social Media Policy;
Council Internet and Email Policy;
Council iPad Policy;
Council Grievance Policy;
Council Mobile Telephone Policy; and
Council Disciplinary Policy.

VARIATION

Council reserves the right to review, vary or revoke this policy.

SERVICE DELIVERY PROCEDURES

Part 1 – Written Correspondence, Telephone, Email and Two-Way

When customers write to Council

- Council shall respond in writing with a full answer as soon as possible, but within 15 working days of receiving correspondence.
- If this is not possible, staff will advise the customer that Council has received their letter with an acknowledgement within 5 working days of receiving correspondence and try to follow up with an answer as soon as possible.
- Infrequently, more than 15 working days will be required to enact a response (most usually after a substantial investigation is necessary and/or a report on the matter is required to be placed before a Council Meeting regarding the issues raised in the correspondence).
- Correspondence will be written in a clear, concise and easy-to-understand way.

Greeting telephone callers

The aim is to answer all calls within 4 rings. If the caller has been kept waiting start the call by saying 'Thank you for waiting'. Greet the caller with 'Good morning' or 'Good afternoon'. Identify the organisation (e.g. 'Upper Lachlan Shire Council' if answering the switchboard) or your section (e.g. 'Environmental Services') and then give your name. Listen carefully to the caller's query.

An appropriate greeting may be:-

- ❖ 'Good morning, Upper Lachlan Shire Council, this is Stephanie'
- ❖ 'Good afternoon, Environmental Services, Donna speaking'

Be aware of the language you are using, avoid the use of slang, jargon and acronyms. Treat all your callers with courtesy and respect.

Returning telephone calls

Ideally, whenever possible, all calls should be returned within 24 hours. If you have been away from your work area, check your message bank immediately upon your return for messages.

If you are unable to provide the information that the customer requests within 24 hours it is important to call them to update the progress of the matter and when you expect to have an answer. If you expect to be absent from your work area you need to make arrangements for a colleague to attend to the matter in your absence.

Taking and delivery of messages

It is always worth checking if another Council employee may be of assistance if the caller's first choice is unavailable. If not, a message will need to be taken.

All messages must be delivered as soon as possible to ensure that urgent matters can be dealt with quickly and efficiently. Messages are to be delivered using Council's email system or message pad for some outdoor staff workers. If you are aware of circumstances that would prohibit the recipient from accessing their email, it is appropriate to advise them that a message is waiting for them. Customer service requests must be logged in Council's Customer Request Management (CRM) system.

When taking a message from a customer ensure full details are obtained:-

- Date and time of call;
- Caller's name and organisation (if applicable);
- The caller's telephone number – repeat these details back to the caller to ensure they are accurate;
- Obtain information regarding the caller's availability or the most appropriate time to respond;
- Brief details of what the call is regarding;
- Whether the call is urgent; and
- If you are aware of any delay that may prevent the call being returned within 24 hours notify the customer of same.

Vetting of telephone calls

It is normal Council procedure that telephone calls for each Department are transferred to the direct line for that section. The staff responsible for answering calls in those sections will vet calls as appropriate.

All calls may be put straight through to the appropriate employee after vetting.

Voice Message protocols

Voice message must only be used in periods of absence, not as a method of screening. Ensure that individual voice messages are welcoming and encourages the caller to leave a message.

Should you be absent from your desk for more than one day, your message should be altered to reflect this and arrangements made for your message bank to be monitored.

Sample wording:-

'You have reached the message bank of [INSERT YOUR FULL NAME], [INSERT YOUR TITLE] of the Upper Lachlan Shire Council. Please leave a brief message and I will return your call at the earliest opportunity. If the matter is urgent, dial "1" and you will be transferred to the switchboard.'

It is important that appropriate staff members in your work area are aware of your voice message access code so that they may monitor your messages if you are unexpectedly absent. As a default, voice message should be set to busy/no answer mode. For operating instructions please refer to the Council's Reception Section.

Call diversion and 'do not disturb' protocols

If you are moving away from your desk and have not activated voice messaging, you should divert your telephone to another appropriate person. Telephones should also be diverted during times of leave or rostered days off. Before taking this action it is vital that you ensure that the appropriate person is available to take your calls.

If there is a permanent arrangement for a specific person to take your calls on diversion, you should still notify that person of your intended time of return and provide instructions regarding any specific calls you may be expecting.

Use of the 'Do not disturb' function should be kept to a minimum.

Email

- Email tends to be of a more conversational style - care must be taken to ensure the tone of the e-mail is appropriate, as it is easy to misinterpret the inflection of the written word when used in a conversational manner.
- In an on-line environment it should be remembered that the intended recipient may not be the only audience as the e-mail may be forwarded or transmitted to another party.
- Be aware that using capitals in e-mail is regarded as shouting and can be interpreted as being rude.
- Council will send an acknowledgement within 5 working days but occasionally, more than 15 working days will be required to enact a full response (most usually after a substantial investigation is necessary and/or a report on the matter is required to be placed before a Council Meeting regarding the issues raised in the correspondence).
- If the matter is urgent, Council will endeavour to respond faster, if possible.
- Staff will ensure council@upperlachlan.nsw.gov.au email box is checked at minimum twice a day during working hours.

Two-Way Radio

- Use accepted radio procedure.
- Be aware that the person you are talking to may not be the only person who can hear the conversation.
- Consider that the person you are calling may have their two-way on the loud speaker.
- Keep the conversation on a professional and business level.
- Be aware of your language, do not use slang or make personal comments.
- Follow accepted protocols.

Part 2 - Face-to-Face Contact

When dealing with customers in a face-to-face situation it is important to keep in mind and apply the procedures used in Part 1 of this Policy. There are however a few additional considerations when dealing with customers face-to-face.

Reception / Public Areas

First impressions count. When working at the reception counter or in public areas of Council premises it is important to be aware of the image that you are conveying. No food or drink should be consumed while serving at the reception counter.

Staff should also be aware of noise levels if their office/work space adjoins a reception area. Levels of inappropriate noise that are audible from the reception counter do not convey a professional image and may make answering the telephone difficult for reception staff.

Similarly, staff should always ensure that they display appropriate behaviour when passing through the reception area or any public area of Council premises.

Outdoor staff are also representatives of the Council and when approached by members of the public need to display appropriate levels of customer service.

Privacy and Personal Information

It is important to be aware of any privacy issues that may arise when serving customers. It is important to use discretion when dealing with sensitive issues such as outstanding monies and complaints. It is also vital to ensure that files and records are not left in public areas where they may be accessed by unauthorised persons; similarly the public access computer terminal on the front counter should not have private information left displayed on the monitor.

Greeting Customers

The way in which Council staff members greet customers and the language that staff members use is important in conveying a professional image. Staff should ensure that they are appropriately dressed for their work area.

Staff must always acknowledge the customer. If staff members are already serving another customer, make eye contact with the new customer to assure them that you will serve them shortly. When staff members are serving a customer and need to answer the telephone be sure to excuse yourself before doing so.

If it is necessary to refer the customer to another staff member ensure that you make appropriate introductions.

Part 3 – General Etiquette

Good service

Always keep the customer informed and let them know if you are unable to deliver on a promise. By giving customers realistic expectations and keeping customers advised of progress on their matter it will be possible to minimise customer dissatisfaction and enhance service delivery.

It is also important to remember to provide outstanding customer service to your internal customers as well as external customers. This means co-operating with your colleagues, timely attendance of meetings, workshops, etc.

Staff absences

When taking a call on behalf of a colleague whom is absent, advise the caller that the person required is not available and the time or date they will be available. Staff should qualify words such as 'unavailable' with positive information such as when the officer will be back and by asking questions such as 'May I help you?'

Do not advise that the person is 'having a day off', 'sick', 'on holidays', 'on a flexi/RDO' or give out any personal information. Simply advise the customer that the staff member is 'unavailable' and offer them the alternatives.

Remember:-

- Try to ascertain what the call is regarding;
- Ask if someone else can help or assist them;
- Be positive in your manner; and
- Explain absences in a manner that will enhance the Council's reputation for service and responsibility and preserves any employee's right to privacy and confidentiality.

When leaving the office, staff must notify the receptionist, providing details of the time frame that they will be out of the office and activate call diversion or message bank.

The staff movements' board must be completed to enable reception to track staff absences throughout the work day. An electronic staff roster is maintained daily.

Making appointments with customers

When making an appointment to meet with a customer you must ensure that the caller knows at which office/depot the meeting will take place and of the need to report to the reception counter. Staff should provide the address, telephone number and if providing written material, a map may be required.

Customers who cannot be satisfied

Customers who cannot be satisfied may include a member of the public or a group of people who by correspondence:-

- Do not accept that Council is unable to assist them;
- Who make unreasonable demands upon Council; or
- Persistently disagree with the action Council has taken in relation to their complaint or concern.

In such instances, counter enquiries and telephone calls are to be referred as follows (in order):-

1. To the professional staff member responsible for that work area;
2. To the Manager or Director responsible for that work area;
3. To the most senior available Council Officer in the appropriate section; or
4. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, the person is to submit their matter in writing to the General Manager.

If in the opinion of the relevant Director, a customer is making unreasonable demands on Council and the customer continues to write, email, telephone and/or visit the agency the Director may write to the customer advising them of Council's concern and requesting that they limit and focus their requests and that if the customer continues to place unreasonable demands on the organisation Council may:-

- i. Not respond to future correspondence on an issue already determined, and only take action where, in the opinion of the relevant Director or General Manager the correspondence raises specific, substantial and serious issues; or
- ii. Only respond to a certain number of requests in a given period; or
- iii. The General Manager shall advise Councillors of any correspondence issued in accordance with this clause; or
- iv. If the customer continues to contact Council after being advised of Council's proposed course of action, the General Manager may, after considering any representations from the customer, advise the customer that either or both of points i) - ii) above will now apply.

Customers who constantly raise the same issue with different staff

If in the opinion of the General Manager, in consultation with the relevant Departmental Director, a customer is constantly raising the same issues with different staff the following actions may be taken:-

1. The Director shall notify the customer that:-
 - i. Only a nominated staff member will 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.
2. The General Manager shall advise Councillors of any notification issued.
3. The customer shall be given one opportunity to make representation to the General Manager on Council's proposed course of action.

Vexatious complaint

If a complaint is found to be frivolous or vexatious, Council will take no further action on the correspondence. A decision to take no further action will be made by the responsible Manager in conjunction with their Director and/or General Manager. In such a situation the person shall be advised in writing that Council will not enter into any further correspondence on the issues contained in the correspondence, and the reasons why the matter is considered frivolous or vexatious.

Customers who are rude, abusive or aggressive

Rude, abusive or aggressive behaviour may include rude or otherwise vulgar noises, expressions or gestures, verbal abuse of either personal or general nature, 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 or customer that if the behaviour continues the conversation or interview will be terminated; or
- 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 notify the relevant Director of the details as soon as possible.

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 returned to the sender and not otherwise acted upon.

Language differences

When dealing with a caller who does not speak English, try to establish what language the caller is using. Assistance may be available from multi-lingual staff, if available.

It may be appropriate to contact a Telephone Interpreter Service for assistance. The telephone number is 131450 and operates 24 hours per day.

Be tolerant; do not equate lack of language skills with lack of intelligence or deafness. Use simple words and sentences and speak slowly. Do not talk down and do not shout.

Cultural differences

Be aware of possible cultural differences. Avoid asking a caller for his/her 'Christian' name, it can be very offensive for a non-Christian. Ask instead for their 'first', 'last', 'given' or 'family' name.

Customer's rights

It is the customers right to expect that Council upholds the principles and standards of service mentioned above.

As a regulatory body, Council is required by Government to:-

- Administer various Acts and Regulations and uphold the law; and
- Safeguard the public interest.

These responsibilities may not always match the customer's expectations or wishes. Where there is a conflict, and where it cannot be resolved at staff or Manager Level, further avenues of appeal may exist.

Specific appeal rights may exist for some decisions made under the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act, Government Information (Public Access) Act, Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act, Local Government Act and Regulations.

If a customer is affected by a decision that provides a legislative entitlement to apply for a review, then the customer will be advised in writing when notified of the outcome of their application.

The NSW Ombudsman, Information and Privacy Commission and Office of Local Government may also review Council actions.

Customer's Responsibilities

To ensure that Council staff members are able to provide customers with the best possible levels of service it is the customer's responsibility to:-

- Provide all necessary information and documentation to support their application or enquiry;
- Being honest and accurate in information sought and supplied to Council;
- Working with Council staff to resolve problems;
- Treat Council staff with courtesy, fairness, and respect;
- Be aware of, and to understand, the need to refrain from treating Council staff in an unacceptable manner; and
- Respecting the rights of other customers.

General

In all of the situations referred to in this policy, adequate documentary records must be made and recorded on the appropriate Council customer request management system (CRMS) and/or TRIM electronic document management (Records) system.

A Customer Service Request is defined as a request for action to be taken in relation to a service. The CRMS is utilised to enable the logging, allocating, tracking and reporting of Customer Service Requests. The CRMS is utilised to measure Council's performance in the completion of service requests.

Records Management is defined as the discipline and organisational function of managing records to meet operational business needs, accountability requirements and community expectations. The TRIM electronic document management system is utilised to enable the recording, storing and disposing of records (including hardcopy and/or electronic records), while maintaining complete, accurate and reliable evidence of business transactions in the form of records information.

Council has a Complaints Policy and Procedure which deals with complaints made by members of the public, government agencies, Councillors, Council staff and other agencies about council services. Council staff grievances, code of conduct complaints, GIPA Access to Information requests, Privacy complaints and requests for information and public interest disclosures are dealt with through separate legislation and Council policies.

Consistent with Council's Complaints Policy and Procedure an initial request for a service is not deemed a complaint, and the matter should only be considered a complaint where there has been an opportunity for Council to rectify a service issue, or rectify an oversight and where it has not been resolved.

Where the General Manager determines to limit a customer's access to Council in any of the ways specified in this policy, the General Manager must advise the Council as soon as possible of the relevant circumstances and the action taken and forward such advice, where appropriate, to the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC), Office of Local Government and the NSW Ombudsman for their information.

