



Hawkesbury City Council

attachment 1  
to  
item 143

Customer Service Policy

date of meeting: 14 August 2012

location: council chambers

time: 6:30 p.m.





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Policy

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## 1. Purpose

- 1.1 To broadly define Hawkesbury City Council's approach to the delivery of timely, courteous and effective services to customers.
- 1.2 To establish a framework to assist Council staff and customers to understand their reciprocal responsibilities in situations where a customer has contacted Council to obtain a service or to make an enquiry, request, report or complaint.
- 1.3 To provide guidelines to assist Council staff in meeting required standards of customer services and to enable customers to form reasonable expectations about how Council staff can assist them to resolve situations where a customer may be dissatisfied with Council's response to a service request or a customer service complaint.

## 2. Objectives

- 2.1 The aim of this policy is to establish customer service guidelines which can respond to the complexity of the service environment in which customer transactions may be conducted. This Policy has been enacted to;
  - (a) outline the standards expected of staff in their dealings with customers;
  - (b) provide guidance to Council staff in working with customers to resolve concerns;
  - (c) ensure that the interests and rights of customers and complainants are protected;
  - (d) assist Council to meet its workplace safety and health and duty of care obligations to staff and members of the public;
  - (e) assist customers to achieve appropriate outcomes to their concerns and complaints;
  - (f) ensure equity and fairness in the allocation of staff time and resources in response to customer concerns and complaints.

## 3. Background.

- 3.1 Hawkesbury City Council is a regulatory authority, a provider and procurer of services, and an elected body representing its community. Consequently, Council delivers a range of services and products – it maintains community assets; administers legislation; polices regulations, involves residents in decision making processes and operates services on a fee for service or a subsidised public good basis. The range of services and products delivered by Council will generate varying customer expectations depending on the nature of the interaction between staff and customers.
- 3.2 Within this environment, the capacity of Council staff to satisfy customer expectations may be constrained by the need to apply planning law and other statutes which may conflict with what customers want; the requirements of other levels of government which may also conflict with what customers want; Council's fiscal position; and the extent to which it can reasonably reconcile the opposing viewpoints of customers about a contentious issue or development proposal.
- 3.3 To guide Council staff in meeting customer expectations, Council has adopted a number of documents. These documents set out the principles and processes which will underpin Council's dealings with its customers and business partners. They also outline standards to assist Council staff in responding to customer requests and the levels of services to be achieved in the provision of specific services to customers.

## 4. Definitions <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions 4.1 to 4.5 derived from Australian Standard <sup>TM</sup> "Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaints handling organisations 9ISO 10002:2004, MOD)"

- 4.1 complainant – person, organisation or its representative, making a complaint.
- 4.2 complaint – expression of dissatisfaction made to an organisation, related to its products, or the complaints-handling process, where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected.
- 4.3 customer – organisation or person that receives a product or service
- 4.4 customer satisfaction – customer’s perception of the degree to which the customer’s requirements have been fulfilled.
- 4.5 customer service – interaction of the organisation with the customer throughout the lifecycle of a product or service.
- 4.6 customer contact - refers to all mechanisms of interaction between Council staff and external customers inclusive of face-to-face interviews, meetings, on-site inspections, counter enquiries, telephone calls, emails, text messages, and written correspondence.
- 4.7 customer transaction - refers to the process where a customer enquiry, request, report or complaint is received, logged, referred, transferred, completed or otherwise responded to.
- 4.8 unreasonable conduct - refers to a set of challenging and ongoing customer interactions which may be exhibited by a complainant where the complainant is unwilling to accept the decision of an agency regarding the outcome of a complaint. The complainant may persistently invoke a range of unreasonable arguments, behaviours, demands or unreasonably withhold their co-operation to the extent that it prevents an agency from resolving a complaint or from ever-achieving an outcome to a complaint which is acceptable to a complainant, or otherwise satisfying the complainant that the agency has exhausted all reasonable complaint handling and investigation processes<sup>2</sup>.

## 5. Principles

### Customer Service Commitment.

- 5.1 In all dealing with customers, Council staff will comply with Council’s Code of Conduct.
- 5.2 Council has adopted a Statement of Business Ethics which requires staff to conduct Council’s business activities in accordance with the Code of Conduct and to observe the highest standards of probity, ethical behaviour and integrity in their business dealings. The Statement of Business Ethics holds Council staff accountable for their actions and requires them to act honestly, legally and ethically when dealing with the community and others; to avoid conflicts of interest, both real and perceived; and to act with due care and diligence and in the public interest.
- 5.3 Council is committed to improving its customer services. Council has adopted a *Customer Service Charter* which identifies 8 customer service principles that define Council’s approach to working with customers. These principles, which reiterate the provisions of Council’s Code of Conduct and Statement of Business Ethics, are outlined in Table 1 on the following page. Council staff will apply these principles in a professional and ethical manner with efficient and courteous service.

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<sup>2</sup> Definition 4.8 derived from NSW Ombudsman *Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual* -1<sup>st</sup> edition, June 2009



## Our Commitment to Customer Service

### Our dealings with customers will be:

1. **clear** - keeping it simple by using plain language and making it easy for customers to contact the right person;
2. **courteous** - being helpful and attentive and listening carefully to customer requests;
3. **timely** - providing a reliable service and responding to customer enquiries quickly;
4. **fair** - being transparent and applying regulations consistently, firmly and fairly while keeping customers informed;
5. **accountable** - being responsible for customer service outcomes and apologising to our customers for our poor service or mistakes;
6. **confidential** - respecting customer privacy and treating customer concerns and personal information confidentially;
7. **informed** - understanding customer expectations and involving customers in product and service development processes;
8. **cost effective** - getting the right balance between customer expectations and delivering an affordable and sustainable service.

*Table 1 – Hawkesbury City Council Customer Service Charter: Staff interaction with customers*

### Standards of Service.

- 5.4 Council has also adopted customer contact standards which outline the timeframes by which Council staff will endeavour to respond to customer requests, and the levels of operational service customers should expect for services and functions exercised by Council. The customer contact and service standards are outlined in the *Hawkesbury City Council Customer Contact & Service Standards* which can be accessed from the Council's website [www.hawkesbury.nsw.gov.au](http://www.hawkesbury.nsw.gov.au).

### Customer Rights and Responsibilities.

- 5.5 The provision of good customer service will require Council staff to work with customers to process and resolve customer requests. For the majority of customer transactions this will involve a simple and straightforward customer-staff exchange. For more complex, or legislative based customer interactions, the completion of a customer transaction will involve an implied customer service 'contract' based on principles of negotiation and co-operation. Whatever the circumstances of a customer transaction, customers can assist Council staff to process and resolve customer requests by;
- treating staff, volunteers and other Council customers with courtesy and respect;
  - being honest and accurate in information sought and supplied to Council staff;
  - working with Council staff to resolve problems; and
  - providing Council staff with feedback.
- 5.6 Council recognises that customers have the right to expect an acceptable level of service and to express their dissatisfaction or concern with Council's response to a customer request or complaint. Council values the mutual benefits of a good customer service relationship but believes that within this relationship there is a clear link between customer rights and customer responsibilities. Customers should be mindful of the need to balance their rights with the rights of staff to safety and respect, and the rights of other customers to equal time and resources.

### Customer Dissatisfaction

- 5.7 Council staff will provide customer services in accordance with the principles and standards set down in the corporate and policy documents adopted by Council. Council recognises that in some circumstances Council staff may be unable to meet customer expectations. Customers who may be dissatisfied with Council's response include members of the public or groups who do not accept that Council is unable to assist them, or who do not accept that Council can provide any further assistance or a level of service other than has been already provided, and/or who disagree with the action Council has taken in relation to their request, concern or complaint.
- 5.8 Council has adopted a Complaints Policy. This Policy defines what constitutes a complaint, identifies different types of complaints, and outlines procedures for recording and dealing with a complaint. In situations where a customer is dissatisfied with Council's investigation or a response to a complaint, the Policy also outlines a mechanism for the referral of an unresolved complaint for external review.

### Unreasonable Conduct

- 5.9 Council understands that customers may feel aggrieved about a response to a concern or complaint. Customers may be understandably upset as a result of an error or omission on the part of Council and in particular circumstances may become distressed when dealing with Council staff. Council staff will work respectfully with customers to try to resolve the situation, provide a clear explanation for a Council decision and offer a prompt apology for any misunderstanding.
- 5.10 In some circumstances, customers who are dissatisfied with a response to a concern or complaint may exhibit challenging behaviours. The NSW Ombudsman<sup>3</sup> has categorised a range of behaviours as potentially constituting 'unreasonable conduct' and has issued a practice manual to assist public sector agencies manage these situations.
- 5.11 Council accepts that dealing with customer complaints, including unreasonable complainant conduct (as defined by NSW Ombudsman) is a core part of Council's work. Council staff will therefore treat all customers, including customers who may be exhibiting unreasonable conduct, with fairness and respect. Council acknowledges that a customer whose conduct is unreasonable may have a legitimate concern or complaint and that customer concerns should be properly and appropriately considered.
- 5.12 To this end, Council will apply the framework of strategies advocated by the NSW Ombudsman's practice manual in its management of unreasonable conduct. The approach advocated by the NSW Ombudsman is to focus on the conduct of a customer or complainant rather than labelling the complainant as a difficult or vexatious individual. The key elements of the approach advocated by the NSW Ombudsman have been reproduced in [Appendix 1](#).

## **6. Application**

### Organisational Responsibilities

- 6.1 To achieve the objectives of this Policy, Council will implement a customer service improvement framework which actively supports a customer focused approach to the delivery of services and products. Under this framework Council will, at a minimum;
- a) continue to work with the Customer Service Institute of Australia to meet benchmarks for good customer service as set out in the International Customer Service Standard (ICSS);

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<sup>3</sup> As detailed in 'Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual' issued by the NSW Ombudsman in June 2009.

- b) conduct regular refresher courses to ensure that Council staff remain aware of their responsibilities as set down in the Code of Conduct and the Statement of Business Ethics;
- c) identify required customer service competencies and incorporate these into staff performance appraisal processes;
- d) provide core training to staff on best practice customer service, complaints handling, and dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct.
- e) regularly review and update the *Customer Contact & Service Standards* to incorporate changes in service specifications;
- f) provide customers and staff with ready access to the documents identified in this Policy;
- g) monitor and report, on a regular basis, Council's performance in delivering services in accordance with its customer contact and operational service standards;
- h) provide customers with access to an easy-to-use complaints process and implement complaints-handling procedures consistent with the relevant Australian Standard™ (ISO 10002:2004, MOD)

#### Staff Responsibilities

- 6.2 In implementing the provisions of this policy, staff are required to treat all customers, whether their behaviour is challenging or not, with fairness and respect. Staff should ensure that customer concerns or complaint are properly and appropriately considered.

#### Customer Responsibilities

- 6.3 Customers should treat staff and other Council customers with courtesy and respect and be honest and accurate in the information sought and supplied to Council staff. Customers should endeavour to work with Council staff to resolve problems.

#### Managing Unreasonable Conduct

- 6.4 Council will endeavour to prevent unreasonable conduct through the skilled, early management of customer concerns and complaints to minimise the chances of unnecessary delays, misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations. Council staff will endeavour to assist a complainant to clearly identify the issues of complaint or concern. Council will provide information to complainants about Council's role, powers and complaint handling process, and the respective rights and responsibilities of Council and the complainant.
- 6.5 Council will implement procedures to assist staff to recognise the 'warning signs' of unreasonable conduct based on tools developed by the NSW Ombudsman. In the first instance, Council staff will endeavour to seek a customer's cooperation to negotiate an acceptable resolution to their concern or complaint to avoid the potential for any escalation of unreasonable conduct. In some instances, this may involve the staff member providing a clear explanation as to why a manifestly unrealistic expectation cannot be met, or drawing a customer's attention to any inappropriate behaviour so that this behaviour can be moderated.
- 6.6 In a few circumstances, where unreasonable conduct poses safety concerns for staff and/or poses significant resource management and equity issues for Council, it may become necessary to limit a customer's contact with Council. Contact can be limited in terms of:
- a. the times a customer may make contact;
  - b. the staff the customer may have contact with;

- c. the form in which the contact may take place – e.g. contact may only be in writing; the customer required making an appointment with the designated staff contact person prior to entering Council, the customer not to contact other agency staff by telephone.

In situations where the customer will not accept Council's decision on a matter and all appropriate avenues of internal review have been exhausted, and the customer continues to contact Council it may be appropriate to notify them that in future:

- d. no phone calls will be accepted or interviews granted concerning the specific matter already reviewed;
- e. correspondence will be received, read and filed but only acknowledged or responded to if they provide significant, new information about their complaint or concern or raise new issues which, in the agency's opinion, warrant fresh action.

6.7 The decision to place limitations on a customer's contact with Council will be made by the General Manager who will be the signatory on correspondence informing the customer of those limitations. The limitations do not override the rights of the customer to seek a service that Council ordinarily provides to the community. Similarly, nothing in paragraph 6.6 should be taken as denying the customer his or her statutory rights to inspect council documents, attend council meetings, to raise concerns with elected representatives on Council, or to lodge a written complaint under Council Complaints Policy and/or Code of Conduct.

## **7. Delegations**

7.1 The delegations and responsibilities of Council staff in relation to the implementation of this Policy will be as determined by the General Manager.

## **References and Governing Policies & Documents.**

1. Hawkesbury City Council - Code of Conduct. Adopted 8 September 2009
2. Hawkesbury City Council – Complaints Policy. Adopted 10 July 2012.
3. Hawkesbury City Council – Statement of Business Ethics. Adopted 30 November 2010
4. Hawkesbury City Council – Customer Service Charter. Adopted 29 June 2010
5. Hawkesbury City Council – Customer Contact & Service Standards. Issued Annually
6. NSW Ombudsman Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual, 1st edition, June 2009
7. Complaints Management in Councils, NSW Ombudsman and the Department of Local Government, July 2009.
8. Effective complaint handling guidelines – 2nd edition NSW Ombudsman, December 2010
9. Australian Standard<sup>TM</sup> 'Customer satisfaction – Guidelines for complaints handling in organizations' (ISO 10002:2004, MOD) April 2006.
10. International Customer Service Standard, Customer Service Institute of Australia, 1999.

**Appendix 1 - 20 key elements for managing unreasonable complainant conduct (as advocated by NSW Ombudsman's Practice Manual)**

### Objectives

- 1 Ensure equity and fairness.
- 2 Improve efficiency in the use of resources.
- 3 Ensure staff safety and comply with OH&S and duty of care obligations.

### Managing unreasonable conduct

- 4 Recognise that dealing with unreasonable complainant conduct is part of the agency's core work.
- 5 Exercise ownership and control over the complaint. The agency decides how the complaint will be dealt with, by whom, how quickly, with what priority, what resources will be given to it and what will be the outcome – not the complainant.
- 6 Focus on specific, observable conduct – the problem not the person.
- 7 Use clear terminology that focuses on the conduct of the complainant, not the person – 'unreasonable conduct' not 'difficult complainant'.
- 8 Apply the relevant management strategies:
  - unreasonable persistence
  - unreasonable demands
  - unreasonable lack of cooperation
  - unreasonable arguments and unreasonable behaviour
  - saying 'no'
  - setting limits
  - setting conditions
  - saying 'no', setting limits/conditions, invoking risk management protocols.
- 9 Respond with consistency to individual complainants and across complaints.
- 10 Respond to the complainant with clear, timely and firm communication.

### Preventing unreasonable conduct

- 11 Manage complainant expectations from the beginning.
- 12 Insist that the complainant shows respect. Set boundaries by not tolerating rudeness, anger or aggression.

### Organisational responsibilities

- 13 Maintain commitment to this approach for dealing with unreasonable conduct.
- 14 Provide staff with adequate supervision and support in their dealings with unreasonable conduct.
- 15 Give staff sufficient time and resources to deal with unreasonable conduct.
- 16 Provide staff with adequate training and guidance in how to deal with unreasonable conduct.

### Staff responsibilities

- 17 Remain calm in the face of unreasonable conduct.
- 18 Show respect for all complainants, those acting reasonably and those not.
- 19 Act impartially in all matters.
- 20 Demonstrate professionalism in dealing with all complainants, those acting reasonably and those not.

