

Complaints and Compliments Policy

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Applicable Legislation:	Local Government Act 1999, s 270 Freedom of Information Act 1991
Related Policies:	Customer Service Charter Requests for Service Policy Elected Member Code of Conduct Employee Code of Conduct Policy Whistleblowers Protection Policy Fraud & Corruption Prevention Policy Internal Review of Council Decisions Policy
Related Documents:	LGA Model Complaints Policy, February 2018 Complaints Handling Procedure Ombudsman SA, Complaint Management Framework, March 2016 Australian Standard ISO 10002-2006, Customer satisfaction –guidelines for complaint handling in organisations

1. Purpose

Coorong District Council provides an extensive range of services and infrastructure to communities, and discharges obligations under many pieces of legislation.

Council is committed to the provision of quality service to customers and regards complaints as an opportunity to improve practices and procedures as well as resolve the matter. This Policy aims to provide a fair, consistent and structured process for Council's customers if they are dissatisfied with a Council action, decision or service. It also covers the management of compliments. Lessons learnt from feedback, as well as complaint investigations, will be used to directly inform service improvements.

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Emphasis will be placed on resolving complaints as quickly as possible. However where complaints cannot be settled in the first instance Council will ensure that they are dealt with through appropriate, more formal procedures by staff with the authority to make decisions. This procedure is broadly consistent with the Australian Standard for complaint handling.

1.1 Principles Underlying the Policy

This Policy is based on five (5) principles, which are fundamental to the way Council approaches complaint handling. They are:

- 1) **Fairness:** treating complainants fairly requires impartiality, confidentiality and transparency at all stages of the process.
- 2) **Accessibility:** to be accessible there must be broad public awareness about Council's Policy and a range of contact options.
- 3) **Responsiveness:** this will be achieved by providing sufficient resources, well trained staff and review and improvement of the systems.
- 4) **Efficiency:** complaints will be resolved as quickly as possible, while ensuring that they are dealt with at a level that reflects their level of complexity.
- 5) **Integration of different areas of Council** where the complaint overlaps functional responsibilities.

2. Definitions

“Council”: refers to the Coorong District Council.

“Employee”: is any person employed by the Council, but also includes any contractors, volunteers, trainees, work experience students and consultants undertaking work for, or on behalf of the Council whether they are working in a full-time, part-time or casual capacity.

“Business Day”: a day when the Council is normally open for business, ie: Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

“Complaint”: an expression of dissatisfaction with a product or service delivered by the 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 also receives service requests and feedback across all areas of operations and clarification may be necessary to make the distinction for the purposes of this Policy.

Complaints which are determined to be about matters that are not Council's responsibility, such as disputes between neighbours, and requests for information or explanation of policies and procedures will not be handled under this Policy.

“Request for Service”: an application to have Council or its representative take some form of action to provide a Council service (see *Request for Service Policy*).

“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

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or formal review of a decision. Feedback may, however, influence future service reviews and delivery methods.

Where Council has failed to meet the normal standards for a service which has been, or should have been delivered, this Policy and the associated procedures apply.

3. Council's Commitment to Complaint Handling

Council has adopted a Customer Service Charter and published a range of service standards to maintain its commitment to the community in relation to its operations. It welcomes complaints as a way of improving its services and programs as well as providing an opportunity to put things right.

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 and the procedure which will be followed is available on Council's website.

Except for minor "Level 1" responses (see "5. Procedures for Resolving Complaints"), Council will try to ensure that, whenever possible, complaints are 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 or compliment in a number of ways:

- Complete the appropriate form on Council's website (www.coorong.sa.gov.au) via the "Feedback" button on the Homepage.
- Telephone: 1300 785 277
- Fax: (08) 8572 3822
- Email: council@coorong.sa.gov.au
- Letter: PO Box 399, Tailem Bend SA 5260
- Visit a Council customer service office (see "12. Further information")

NOTE: Any comments or requests made through Social Media (ie: Facebook) are not considered, nor treated as an official Complaint.

All complaints and compliments (both verbal and written) are recorded in Council's records management system and/or customer request system in such a way that the information can also be analysed for service improvement opportunities.

Complainants are advised of the likely timeframe required to investigate and resolve a complaint, and regularly updated as to progress where necessary.

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

3.1 Seven Steps of the Complaint Handling Process

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

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- 1) Acknowledge complaints promptly.
- 2) Assess the complaint - simple problems may not need to be investigated.
- 3) Plan the investigation where one is warranted.
- 4) Investigate the complaint.
- 5) Respond to the complainant with a clear decision.
- 6) Follow up any customer service concerns.
- 7) Consider whether there are systemic issues which need correction.

4. Timeframes for Response

Where a complaint cannot be resolved immediately, the complainant will be advised of the process to be undertaken. Council will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within three (3) business days, and, where possible, resolve it within fifteen (15) business days. If a resolution is not possible within that time, the complainant will be kept regularly informed of progress, either by email, letter or personal contact (ie: phone call).

5. Procedures 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.

Level 1: Immediate Response to Resolve the Complaint

All staff are empowered to handle 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.

Level 2: Complaint Escalated to a More Senior Officer

A complaint will be directed to a more senior officer in the Council, where the 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 requiring 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.

Level 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

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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.

Council's detailed Complaints Procedure is available to the public upon request (see "12. Further Information" below).

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.

5.1 Complaints Concerning Employees of Council

Council is committed to ensuring that the rights of both the complainant and employee are strictly observed. Investigations will be referred to a Director in the first instance and escalated to the CEO if necessary.

Full details concerning the complaint, investigation and action taken will be kept in the employee's personnel file and will be kept confidential.

5.2 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 Council Member or the Chief Executive Officer;
- Freedom of Information applications;
- Insurance claims;
- Decisions made under legislation other than the *Local Government Act*, such as the *Development Act 1993* or *Expiation of Offences Act 1996*.

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.

6. 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.

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

7. Compliments

Council values positive feedback and compliments as they demonstrate where Council is doing things right and what Council needs to do more of and/or continue to do.

Positive feedback will be used to promote best practices across Council and to recognise staff members who consistently demonstrate excellent customer service.

Compliments will be processed as follows:

- referred to the appropriate Director and/or department and any staff member/s involved
- recorded, identifying the staff member, department and reason for compliment; and
- a copy of a letter of compliment will be kept in the employee's confidential personnel file.

8. Using Complaints and Compliments to Improve Service

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

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

9. 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 and any person who is the subject of a complaint 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.

10. Remedies

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.

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As a general principle the complainant should, so far as possible, be put in the position he or she would have been in, had things not gone wrong. This may mean providing the desired service or changing a decision. Sometimes, however, it may only be possible to offer an apology.

Compensation will only be offered in cases where the loss or suffering is considered substantial. The Elected Council and the CEO are the only representatives authorised to offer financial compensation and may consult with the Local Government Association Mutual Liability Scheme before taking any such action.

11. Alternative Remedies

Council may seek to use alternative dispute resolution methods such as mediation to resolve a complaint in circumstances where the CEO 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 remedies, including any rights of appeal and the right to make a complaint to an external agency such as the SA Ombudsman.

12. Further Information & Policy Review

This Policy will be reviewed every two (2) years, including within six (6) months following the next periodic regular election. The date for next review is March 2021.

This Policy and the associated procedure will be available for inspection at the Council offices listed below during ordinary business hours and available to be downloaded, free of charge, from Council's internet site: www.coorong.sa.gov.au

Coorong Civic Centre

95 - 101 Railway Terrace
PO Box 399
Tailem Bend
Phone: 1300 785 277
Fax: 8572 3822

Meningie Information Hub

49 Princes Highway
Meningie

Tintinara Customer Service Centre

37 Becker Terrace
Tintinara

Copies will be provided to interested parties upon request. Email council@coorong.sa.gov.au

Any grievances in relation to this policy or its application should be forwarded in writing addressed to the Chief Executive Officer of Council.