



Comhairle Ceantair
Lár Uladh
Mid Ulster
District Council

Customer Service Policy

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1.0 Introduction

As an organisation which is primarily service-based and which has increasing responsibility for the planning, design and delivery of services which impact significantly all aspects of the lives of local people, Mid Ulster District Council is committed to adopting a customer-focussed approach to its work.

A corporate Customer Services Policy will establish the principles to which the Council is committed, together with the procedures and standards for staff, through which the Council expects to demonstrate excellence in customer service.

The policy has been created to reflect the elements within the Customer Service Excellence ® Standard. The first version of the policy (agreed by the Council in December 2014) included the principles, procedures and standards for managing complaints, which had been developed in line with the former Northern Ireland Ombudsman's document 'A framework for effective complaint handling'. The framework was recommended for any new public body when creating a complaints scheme. The revised version of the policy (November 2016), reflects recommendations and requirements of the new Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

2.0 Policy Aims & Objectives

The Customer Service Policy aims to create an organisational culture which:

- focuses on the needs of customers in the design and delivery of services, whether internal or external
- seeks, listens and acts on the views of its customers
- values customer views and complaints as important sources of information for putting things right and as opportunities to improve service delivery.

The policy objectives are to:

- promote a positive customer service ethos across the organisation
- ensure staff understand customer service values and demonstrate them in their behaviours and interaction with all customers
- develop appropriate and measurable standards across all customer access channels
- ensure that meaningful engagement and consultation with customers takes place
- ensure that the results of engagement, consultation and feedback are used to influence strategic and operational decisions.

3.0 Policy Scope

Everyone with whom the Council comes into contact, externally and internally, is a customer and therefore the Customer Service Policy affects residents, visitors, other organisations across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, and all Council staff.

The policy and its procedures apply in all circumstances except where:

- other procedures are prescribed by law

- legislative or other requirements take precedence.

The policy does not apply to complaints outside the definition provided in the Complaints Procedure at Appendix 1.

4.0 Linkage to Corporate Plan

One of the six values detailed in the Council's Corporate Plan (2015-2019) is to be customer-focussed 'designing and delivering our services in response to and around the needs of our customers and within our resources'. This value applies across each of the Plan's stated Corporate Themes, but is particularly relevant to the theme 'Delivering for our People'.

5.0 Roles and Responsibilities

The Customer Services Policy acknowledges that good customer service is dependent upon a commitment from the Council as a corporate body and is the responsibility of all Council employees.

- Elected members will endorse the policy, its implementation and procedures.
- The Senior Management Team will demonstrate its commitment to the policy by adopting the customer service values and principles, promoting them among their Heads of Service and through them, the wider staff, monitoring performance and recommending change to improve customer service.
- Heads of Service will adopt and promote the customer service values and principles, ensure procedures are applied consistently across their areas of service responsibility, review standards and performance, encourage staff training and, based on customer feedback and experience, recommend developments and improvements to the Senior Management Team.
- The Organisational Development Department and Marketing Communications Service will support the dissemination of the customer service ethos throughout the organisation, particularly through a planned customer service training and development programme.
- All staff will demonstrate the customer service values and principles through their positive behaviour and professional approach to the delivery of their services and by participating in on-going training and development opportunities.

6.0 Procedure and Implementation

The policy is subject to a set of core customer service principles and a complementary set of principles for managing complaints.

Customer Service Principles

- We will design and deliver our services around our customers, rather than business processes.
- We will be professional, helpful and courteous at all times.
- We will be open, transparent and proactive in our information provision.
- We will act with fairness, integrity and impartiality, according equal respect to all.
- We will use a mix of contact channels for our customers to help them reach us in a way which best suits their needs.
- We will maintain our standards across all customer contact channels and at all stages of the customer journey.
- We will undertake regular, appropriate and effective consultation with our customers to identify their needs, to inform our decisions and improve our services and performance.
- We will monitor our performance, evaluate and act on the outcomes.
- We will seek to be efficient in our customer service, using technology appropriately to improve the flexibility and accessibility of customer contact and reducing avoidable contact for our customers.
- We will develop a high standard of customer service by investing in our staff training and development and engaging with them on customer service issues.
- We will provide and maintain safe and clean facilities for our customers, minimising risk of injury to our customers and our staff.

Complaints Principles

The Council, in line with its commitment to providing high standards of customer care, and to listening and acting on the views of its customers, values complaints as an important source of information for putting things right and as an opportunity to improve service delivery.

In doing so, the Council is committed to the following principles for effective complaint handling:

- Our complaints procedure will be customer-focussed, clear, accessible and simple.
- Our complaints handling will be fair and impartial.

- Our complaints handling will be timely, sensitive, effective and consistent.
- We will be accountable, acknowledge and apologise for our mistakes and put things right whenever possible.
- We will strive to use complaints as an opportunity to deliver continuous improvement in the design and delivery of our services.

These principles have been used to create a set of customer service and complaints handling standards, together with procedures for managing customer services and complaints across existing customer contact channels.

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman considers it good practice to limit any complaints procedure to two formal stages and this is the approach reflected in the Council's revised procedure (November 2016).

The Ombudsman also encourages informal resolution as a means of achieving a timely solution, while cautioning against a lack of formality which may lead to poor or no record-keeping and, therefore, no opportunity to learn from the complaint or to manage the complaint should it progress to the formal stages. This is also reflected in the complaints handling procedures.

Standards of behaviour for customers of the Council also form part of these procedures.

The standards and procedures are detailed in the Customer Service procedural document at Appendix 1.

Implementation will be via a rolling customer service training programme, featuring both general and bespoke elements, and tailored appropriately for staff.

This policy will be published in hard copy and on-line, and promoted appropriately across the Council's communication channels.

Procedures for recording customer service data and for monitoring adherence to customer service standards will be developed.

7.0 Impact Assessment

- Equality screening and impact assessment

The policy has been equality screened using Mid Ulster District Council's Equality Scheme. No impact assessment was required.

- Staff and financial resources

Initial training for all front line staff was provided and financed via the Capacity Building Programme (January 2015 – March 2015) and thereafter via an on-going customer service training programme.

Implementation of the policy requires the release of staff across the organisation to attend core customer service training, with regular refresher training for key customer-facing staff.

8.0 Support and Advice

For further information about the policy, please contact Ursula Mezza, Head of Marketing and Communication.

9.0 Communication

The policy will be communicated internally using a range of appropriate internal communication methods, with external communication via traditional print and digital channels.

The policy will also form part of the induction process for all new staff.

10.0 Monitoring and Review Arrangements

The effectiveness of the policy will be monitored using feedback from those staff involved in its implementation and data collated on performance against standards.

Formal review, with any appropriate recommendations for change, will take place annually.

Appendix 1

Customer Service Standards & Procedures

Please note that procedures apply in all circumstances except where other procedures are prescribed by law or legislative or other requirements take precedence, for example, under the Freedom of Information Act.

Council Facilities: Public Reception Areas

In principle, any council building which is open to the public is a potential customer access point for council services.

Public reception areas in these facilities are generally multi-functional, where staff meet and greet visitors, provide telephone answering services, signpost to other organisations, deliver services directly and support other services.

They are, therefore, prime customer facing points requiring a well-trained and knowledgeable staff.

Customer facing staff working in public reception areas will:

- wear the agreed corporate uniform.
- wear the agreed corporate name badge.
- greet every customer.
- give priority to those customers present in the reception area over telephone answering, dealing with other issues or dealing with staff.
- not use personal mobile phones at their work station, except in cases of emergency.

Council staff who do not work in public reception areas but who interact or transact business with customers in those spaces, will give priority to dealing with those customers and will adhere to the principles, procedures and standards in the Customer Service policy.

Council staff who do not work in public reception areas will only spend time in those areas and with the reception-based staff when they are dealing with work-related issues.

Telephone Answering

The telephone remains an important tool for customers contacting the Council, and is cited as a preferred method when making service enquiries. Maintaining a high standard of customer telephone contact across the organisation is, therefore, essential to perceptions of the Council as a customer-focussed organisation.

- All staff will aim to answer phone calls within 20 seconds.
- All staff will answer the phone to an external caller by saying good morning, good afternoon, good evening, followed by the council/department/service name as appropriate, followed by their first name and a phrase, such as 'can I help you?' or 'how can I help you?'.
- All staff will endeavour to deal with customer queries and requests directly and will only transfer a call to another member of staff if the caller specifically requests to speak to a named officer or if they do not have the information required.
- Where a caller wishes to speak to a member of staff who is unavailable, the staff member dealing with the call must always offer to help, take a message or, if applicable, provide a mobile telephone number.
- If a member of staff is on leave, the call should be transferred to another nominated member of staff who will be able to deal with the issue or query.
- If a call cannot be dealt with directly or transferred to an appropriate officer for response, a message should record the caller's contact details and sufficient information about the subject of the call. Staff should avoid telling a customer that another member of staff is sick, at lunch, on a tea break or busy and should not ask a customer to ring back.
- Where an issue or query raised by telephone cannot be dealt with immediately, the responsible officer will provide a reply as soon as possible, adhering to the response times for written communication, but recognising that telephone contact is expected to be, and should be, considerably more rapid.
- Where a caller contacts the Council about a service, facility or responsibility of another organisation, all staff will provide a 'signposting' service, providing points of contact for the other organisation whenever possible.
- Telephone messages must be communicated in a timely manner.
- Where voice mail is used for 'out of office' cover, the member of staff must record an appropriate greeting and must respond to messages in a timely manner or ensure messages are passed to another appropriate member of staff for prompt call back.
- Voice mail should not be used as 'out of office' cover for extended periods of time. Calls should be diverted to an appropriate extension.
- The use of speakerphones should be avoided and when used, customers must be informed they are on speaker and who else is present.

Written Communication

Any letter or email communication is accepted by the recipient as being from 'the Council' and therefore all care must be taken to ensure that content, language and grammar are correct and the tone of the correspondence is suitable.

While often considered more informal, particularly when used internally, email communication should adhere to the same standards as traditional letters.

As well as the standards below, written communication will also follow guidance contained in the Communications Policy, specifically those parts relating to the use of the Council's brand, font type and size, and the procedure for managing requests for information in alternative formats, including languages other than English.

- All letters issued by council officers will be issued on the official Mid Ulster District Council letterhead.
- Where hard copy information which does not require an accompanying letter is being issued by post an official Mid Ulster District Council compliment slip should be used.
- In formal written correspondence, the Council will be referred to as Mid Ulster District Council.
- In all written communication, the first name and surname of the officer signing the correspondence will be used, together with job title. Contact details, including direct dial telephone numbers and email address, where applicable, will be provided to ensure customers have an easily identifiable point of contact. Normally, formal correspondence will be signed by a senior member of staff (Director, Head of Service or other officer designated by a Director).
- Standard phrases to close letters will be used as appropriate, that is 'yours sincerely' or 'yours faithfully'. When appropriate, officers may use less formal closing phrases, such as 'kind regards' or 'best wishes'. Phrases such as 'yours in sport' are not to be used.
- All staff with a '@midulstercouncil.org' email address must use the standard email template, including the agreed signature template.
- Out of office automatic email response must be enabled where a member of staff will be absent for more than 1 working day. The out of office message must provide an alternative point of contact for enquiries and the agreed point of contact for anyone making a request under the Freedom of Information Act, Environmental Information Regulations or Data Protection Act.
- All correspondence by letter received by the Council will be acknowledged within 3 working days, unless a full response is to be issued in the interim period. Acknowledgements should be issued by email whenever possible.

- All external correspondence received by email will be acknowledged within 3 working days, unless a full response is to be issued in the interim period.
- All correspondence will receive a response within 15 working days. Where a response cannot be issued within the 15 working day timeframe, the Council will contact the customer to provide an explanation and a new target response time.
- When appropriate, a response to written correspondence can be made by telephone or in person, in which case a file note should be made and retained to record details of the contact, including date, time and outcome.

Councillors routinely receive written correspondence, by letter, by email and via on-line channels and routinely respond in their capacity as individual elected members.

- Where an elected member receives correspondence relating to Council business in an official capacity (as Chair, Deputy Chair or Chair of a Committee), the appropriate senior council officer will, on request, assist in providing information to facilitate a response which reflects the corporate position or, if requested, draft a response.

Standards For Our Customers

We are committed to providing a high quality service that meets the needs of our customers. In return, we expect certain standards from our customers:

- We expect our customers to treat all of our staff with the respect that they themselves would wish to receive.
- We do not expect our customers to threaten, physically or verbally abuse any of our staff.
- In the event that we make a mistake, we will always try to make amends. Abuse of staff in these or any other circumstances does not help any situation. During a telephone call, should such abuse reach an unacceptable level, staff will politely end the conversation. In person-to-person circumstances staff will remove themselves from the situation and call for assistance if required. All incidents of abusive behaviour will be recorded.
- We expect all our customers to co-operate with any reasonable instructions or requests from our staff.
- Our customers will not wilfully harm things owned by the Council, Councillors or staff.

As identified by the Ombudsman (Policy on Unacceptable Behaviour by Complainants, The Ombudsman Policy, November 2012 - <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Policy-on-Unacceptable-Behaviour-by-Complainants-.pdf>), complainants whose actions or behaviour are

considered to be unacceptable generally fall into the following three broad categories:

Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour

Violence is not restricted to acts of aggression that may result in physical harm. It also includes behaviour or language (whether oral or written) that may cause staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused.

Examples of actions or behaviours which fall under this heading include threats, physical violence, personal verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, and rudeness. Inflammatory statements and unsubstantiated allegations may be regarded as abusive behaviour.

Staff can expect to be treated courteously and with respect. Violence or abuse towards staff is unacceptable. Staff understand that the anger felt by many complainants is directed towards the subject matter of their complaint. However, it is not acceptable when that anger escalates into aggression directed towards staff.

Unreasonable Demands

Complainants may make unreasonable demands through the amount of information they seek, the nature and scale of service they expect, or the number of approaches they make. What amounts to unreasonable demands will always depend on the circumstances surrounding the behaviour, and the seriousness of the issues raised by the complainant.

Examples of actions which fall under this heading include vexatious complaints, demanding responses within an unreasonable timescale, insisting on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff who is unavailable, continual phone calls or letters, repeatedly changing the substance and focus of the complaint, or raising unrelated concerns. Such demands may be considered unacceptable and unreasonable if they start to impact substantially on the work of the Council, i.e. taking up an excessive amount of staff time to the disadvantage of other complainants or functions.

Unreasonable Persistence

Some complainants will not, or cannot, accept that the Council is unable to assist them further or provide a level of service other than that provided already. Complainants may persist in disagreeing with the action or decision taken in relation to their complaint or contact the Council persistently about the same issue.

Examples of actions which fall under this heading include vexatious complaints (note the Ombudsman's 2012 policy on unacceptable behaviour - <https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Policy-on-Unacceptable-Behaviour-by-Complainants-.pdf> provides definitions of what may constitute a vexatious complaint), persistent refusal to accept a decision made in relation to a complaint, persistent refusal to accept explanations relating to what the Council can or cannot do, and continuing to pursue a complaint without presenting any new information. The actions of persistent complainants are considered to be unacceptable when they take up a disproportionate amount of time and resources.

Managing Unacceptable Actions or Behaviour

The Council will endeavour to allow a complaint to proceed through the normal complaints' handling process. However, to manage unacceptable actions or behaviour, the Council may decide to restrict contact in person, by telephone, fax,

letter or electronically, or by any combination of these.

Complaints Standards & Procedures

Definition of a complaint

In line with the Ombudsman's definition, the Council considers a complaint to be:

'Any oral or written expression of dissatisfaction by any person, however made, about the service, actions or inactions of the Council or its officers which requires a response.'

This definition excludes requests for a Council service, information requests or appeals to a tribunal. It also excludes any complaints which are governed by other legislative processes or have distinct or separate mechanisms to handle complaints (e.g. internal grievance and disciplinary policies).

Who can make a complaint

The definition of a complaint allows 'any person' to express their dissatisfaction.

On occasions when the 'aggrieved' party may be incapable of making a complaint (a minor or person suffering from an illness or other incapacity), the Council will accept a complaint made on their behalf on receipt of a letter of authorisation or power of attorney.

At any stage the customer may seek the advice and / or support of their local Councillor, MLA or MP in dealing with a complaint against the Council. Councillors should make their constituent aware of this procedure, and complaints passed on by them will be processed in accordance with it.

Employees may also use the complaints process to make a complaint about services or actions of the Council which they experience as a customer. Complaints relating to their employment with the Council will be dealt with via the relevant internal procedure.

How to complain

Complaints can be made in person, by telephone, by email, by post and on-line.

In person: at any staffed council facility.

By telephone: 03000 132 132

By email: info@midulstercouncil.org

In writing: Council offices, Burn Road, Cookstown; Council offices, Circular Road, Dungannon; Council offices, Ballyronan Road, Magherafelt.

On-line: www.midulstercouncil.org

Informal Procedure

Where possible, the Council will aim to resolve complaints informally at the point of service through direct and prompt engagement with the complainant and with the involvement of the level of management where required.

Formal Procedure

Stage 1: A complaint is considered by the relevant service and a response issued by the relevant Head of Service, with input by the relevant senior officer as required.

We will not investigate complaints relating to issues which are greater than 3 months old.

Stage 2: If the complainant feels the complaint has not been resolved adequately and is unhappy with the outcome of Stage 1, the complainant may ask for the complaint to be referred to the Chief Executive or the Chief Executive's nominee who will review the investigation and issue a final response.

The complainant must request a Stage 2 review within 10 working days of the receipt of the outcome of Stage 1, and make clear why a Stage 2 review is being requested.

A complainant who is dissatisfied with the outcome of the Council's investigation at the conclusion of Stage 2, may then refer the complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

From 1 April 2016, the Council is required to give a complainant written notice advising them:

- when the Council's internal complaints procedure has been exhausted
- that they may refer the matter to the Ombudsman if they remain dissatisfied
- of the time limit for making such a referral (generally within 6 months of the completion of the Council's complaints procedure)
- how to contact the Ombudsman.

This advice must be issued within two weeks of the day on which the complaints procedure has been exhausted.

Where a complaint relates to a Director or Head of Service who would normally be responding, the issue will be passed to another appropriate member of staff.

Response standards

Complaints made in writing (by post, email or on-line) will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days and contain the name and contact details of the member of staff dealing with the complaint. Acknowledgements should be issued by email whenever possible.

Where a complaint is received in person or by telephone, the complainant's relevant contact details must be recorded to allow acknowledgements and responses to be issued as appropriate.

All complaints will be responded to within 15 working days. If a complaint cannot be responded to within 15 working days, the Council will contact the complainant to provide an explanation and a new target response time.

Cross-Departmental Complaints

Where a complaint concerns the services delivered by more than one Department, a lead Department will take responsibility for co-ordinating a single corporate response and for ensuring that procedures and standards are adhered to.

Anonymous complaints

The Council will not normally investigate anonymous complaints. However, the Council recognises that its complaints procedure must be sufficiently flexible to allow anonymous complaints to be investigated in exceptional circumstances where the complaint identifies systemic issues of concern.

Special or unusual cases

The Council's complaints procedure will also be sufficiently flexible to allow special or unusual cases to be dealt with. For example, where a complaint highlights financial impropriety or any criminal activity, the Council will obtain legal advice or pass the complaint to a designated fraud officer to ensure that any evidence pertaining to a potential criminal investigation is not tampered with or lost.

Making a complaint about a Councillor

Under the Local Government Act (NI) 2014, Councillors are bound by a mandatory Code of Conduct (<https://nipso.org.uk/nilgcs/>) which sets out the principles and rules which Councillors must observe.

Anyone who believes that a Councillor has breached the Code of Conduct may complain in writing to the Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner For Standards (also the Ombudsman) who has the power to investigate.

Recording and monitoring

Accurate recording of complaints is essential to ensure they are handled effectively, and to ensure information on the nature, number and outcome of complaints can be collated, analysed and used to inform decision-making, service design and delivery.