



COMMUNICATION POLICY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to ensure Council communicates effectively with the community. By facilitating community feedback and consultation, Council seeks to accurately represent the interests of the community and improve the quality of service it provides.

The policy ensures the community has access to information on the activities of Council and has regular opportunities to contribute to Council decision making, or comment on Council projects and initiatives, Council services, or Council's overall performance.

Guarantees of Service are also outlined in this policy to ensure the community receives quality customer service when communicating with Council.

SCOPE

This policy applies to situations where:

- Council staff communicate with residents, ratepayers, local businesses, community groups and members of the public
- Council receives customer feedback
- Council plans major projects, policies, management plans or other proposals that may impact on the quality of life of members of the community; or affect the area.

Hunter's Hill Council recognises that focussed communication strategies can markedly improve:

- Council's understanding of community needs
- the way Council provides services to the community
- community understanding of Council responsibilities
- awareness of Council-organised activities and events
- Hunter's Hill Council's public profile
- the amount and variety of feedback received from the community on Council affairs
- information exchange
- the way members of the local community communicate with the Council
- community perception of Council-organised activities



- internal communications

Effective communication with the community is also necessary for Council to meet its responsibilities as prescribed by the Local Government Act 1993. The Act is intended to encourage and assist the effective participation of local communities in the affairs of government'. Under the Hunter's Hill Council Charter as set out by the Act, Council is committed to principles of due consultation, facilitating the involvement of the public and keeping the community informed about their activities.

This policy also upholds Hunter's Hill Council's Organisational Values that state Council's commitment to understanding community needs and to using information to improve our services.

The Environmental Planning and Assessment Act also requires Council to have mandatory community consultation when developing plans of management for community land or local environment plans, or when assessing development applications.

The NSW Ombudsman's 'Better Service and Communication Guidelines for Local Government' (2000) have been consulted during the development of this policy to ensure that Council meets high standards in customer service delivery and communication with the community.

This policy applies to Councillors and Council staff.

DEFINITIONS

Council Staff

All permanent, part-time, temporary, casual staff, Council committee members, Council delegates and volunteers and contractors employed by Council.

Responsible officer

The Council staff member to whom an enquiry, service request or complaint is referred to for investigation and resolution.

The Act

The Local Government Act 1993



POLICY STATEMENT

PART 1 POLICY GUIDELINES

1. GUARANTEES OF SERVICE

1.1 *Customer Enquiries*

Council staff must be courteous, patient and helpful at all times when communicating with the public/residents and ratepayers.

Enquiries must be dealt with in a timely and efficient manner. Reasonable requests for further information on a particular issue will be referred to and followed up by the responsible officer.

Enquiries and complaints will be dealt with in accordance with Council's Complaints Handling Policy and Council's Customers Service Request and Complaint Handling Manual.

1.2 *Correspondence*

Council staff must acknowledge all correspondence or provide an interim reply within 10 working Days.

All correspondence must be sent in accordance to Council's style manual and via Council's Records.

If the matter requires further investigation, a letter must be sent notifying the recipient of the following:

- a) Their enquiry is being investigated.
- b) The name of the responsible officer following up the enquiry.
- c) Any additional information regarding how the matter is likely to progress or the processes and procedures that must be undertaken to enable a full response to the enquiry to be given.

Exceptions to these standards include where:

- a) Council or a member of Council staff receives correspondence that contains substantially and clearly inappropriate content – such as threatening or abusive language or adverse personal reflections on individuals. In this circumstance a substantive reply will not be forwarded.
- b) Objections to development applications where a response is offered following the determination of the application.



- c) The request is in the form of an application subject to a fee.
- d) Council receives repeated complaints from an individual or community group regarding a complaint that has already been assessed and reviewed by Council staff. Such circumstances will be dealt with in accordance with Council's complaints handling policy and may involve limitations on further correspondence on that matter with the concerned individual or group.

1.3 *Telephone Enquiries*

Council staff must answer all calls promptly. Staff on Council's switchboard must either deal with the call, transfer the call to the appropriate officer or take a detailed message if the appropriate officer is unavailable.

Council staff must always return calls and ensure any follow-up activities are carried out to ensure customers receive full and appropriate service.

1.4 *Availability of staff and Councillors for Interviews*

Residents and members of the public are free to request a meeting with a member of staff.

To seek advice or information on development applications in the Municipality, Council's Development and Regulatory Control staff are available for consultation week days between 8.30 – 10.00am and 3.30 - 4.30pm.

Council staff will assist members of the local community who wish to contact Councillors.

1.5 *User friendly communication*

Council must communicate clearly and effectively with the public. For each instance of communication, Council should identify their target audience and ensure the means of communication is accessible and appropriate to that audience. Council's target audience may include

- Local community
- General community
- Local business



- General business groups
- Other government departments
- Local authorities
- Politicians
- Local and national media
- Volunteers
- Sponsors and donors
- Schools
- Education-specific community, including students and their parents
- Special interest groups
- The media
- Suppliers and distributors.

When communicating with the community, Council must also ensure that the language used in communication is easily understood by the general public.

Council must also be sensitive to barriers to communication that may be experienced by people within the local community such as language barriers, visual impairment, cultural differences or physical or intellectual disability.

1.6 *The Community's Responsibility*

To ensure prompt and accurate service delivery, it is vital that residents, rate payers and members of the public provide Council staff with all of the details of their enquiry, request for service or complaint in the first instance.

Consistent with a commitment to quality service, Council endeavours to respond to the demands of the local community in as short a time as possible. However, Council does have limited resources. Council asks members of the local community to accept these reasonable limitations in regard to the time taken to respond to customer requests.

Residents, members of the public and rate payers also have a responsibility to communicate appropriately with Council staff and must refrain from being abusive, threatening, intimidating or aggressive to members of staff.

2. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

- 2.1 Council will ensure that the community has access to the information necessary to comment on the activities of Council. Council will continue to deliver information on the activities of Council even when there is no legal requirement to do so.



- 2.2 Council will provide Information on Council affairs through:
- Opening Council meetings to members of the public.
 - Publishing minutes of Council and committee meetings.
 - Providing public access to Council and Council committee meetings where all the members are Councillors.
 - Providing Public access to a variety of Council documents and Council records in accordance with Council's Access to Information policy.
 - Publishing notices in local newspapers and on Council's website.
 - Sending media releases on Council affairs and answering questions from journalists.
 - Keeping individuals and interest groups up to date on the progress of projects they are interested in.
 - Placing on public exhibition plans and policies proposed for Council adoption.
 - Council newsletters and brochures.
 - Hosting information evenings on topical issues that directly affect the community.

3. COMMUNICATION CONSULTATION

- 3.1 Hunter's Hill Council is committed to understanding the needs and expectations of the community and recognises that community consultation is important to the Council decision-making process.
- 3.2 Council will ensure feedback is sought on:
- a) major proposals or projects of Council
 - b) proposals or projects that may impact on the quality of life of members of the community; or that may affect the area.

Examples of such projects or proposals include Council's annual management plan and plans of management for community land and local environment plans, as well as private and commercial development matters.



- 3.3 Council will provide the best available opportunity for residents to contribute to Council decisions. Such opportunities include:
- hosting public meetings and
 - conducting surveys or questionnaires or
 - establishing focus groups.
 - allowing residents and members of the public to directly address Council during Council meetings on matters in the current Council agenda. Permission to speak must be obtained prior to the meeting by contacting Hunter's Hill Council.
- 3.4 When making decisions on important issues, Council is expected to actively seek community feedback to gather the range of views available. If required, Council must develop specific consultation plans tailored to the particular circumstances.
- 3.5 Council will reflect on the outcome of consultations and will use the public interest as the basis for decision making. However, individuals and community groups must remember that Council has the responsibility (given by its electors) to make a final decision after all aspects and opinions have been considered.

3.6 *Addressing meetings of the Council*

Residents may apply to speak at a Council meeting on any matter listed on the meeting agenda. To speak at a Council meeting, permission must be sought by 12.00noon on the day of the meeting. Requests are then referred to the Mayor for determination. For a permission to speak form, please contact Hunter's Hill Council.

3.7 *Consultation on Draft Local Policies*

Council must give public notice of a draft local policy after it is prepared in accordance with Council's Development Control Plan No.20 – Notifications Policy.

The period of public exhibition must be no less than 28 working days. Council must publicly exhibit the draft local policy together with any other matter that it considers appropriate or necessary to improve understanding of the draft policy and its implications.

The public notice must also specify a period of 42 days or more after the draft local policy is placed on public exhibition during which Council will receive submissions on the draft local policy.



After considering all submissions received concerning the draft local policy Council may decide to:

- a) amend the draft local policy
- b) adopt it without amendment
- c) not to adopt it, except where the adoption of criteria is mandatory.

If Council decides to amend its draft local policy, it may publicly exhibit the amended draft local policy in accordance with this part or, if the Council is of the opinion that the amendments are not substantial, it may adopt the amended draft local policy without public exhibition.

3.8 *Consultation on Development Applications*

Consultation on development applications will be sought from affected property owners in accordance with Council's Development Control Plan No.20 – Notification Policy. Development applications are also made publicly available on Council's website.

In the case where there are significant concerns from residents in relation to a development proposal, Council will arrange in the first instance, conciliation conferences. The conferences will properly inform residents about the application and allow applicants and objectors to freely discuss issues and concerns, and wherever possible, come to an agreement or understanding.

Prior to lodging development applications, property owners, prospective buyers, consultants and/or architects may choose to and are actively encouraged to present ideas or preliminary sketches on development proposals to Council's Development Control Unit (DCU).

3.9 *Consultation with Community Groups*

Hunter's Hill Council has a large number of active community groups with a variety of ambitions and aims. Council recognises the important role undertaken by its various community groups and actively seeks to support their initiatives and gain their input in decision making.

As necessary, Council will:

- inform community groups of matters of interest and concern. It will invite these groups to contribute their thoughts, opinions and judgements



- provide community groups with information on relevant development proposals which may affect their area or sphere of interest
- meet with community groups to provide knowledge and support from Council staff on any initiatives that will directly affect the community
- provide Council representatives to sit on community committees
- providing regular and updated information to community committees
- seek regular updates from community groups on their initiatives and goals.

3.10 *Consultation with Local Business*

Council will invite local business to participate in Council decision making to ensure Council projects reflect the variety of interests within the community.

4. COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

4.1 *Receiving Feedback*

Council is committed to understanding the needs and expectations of the community in order to achieve effective service delivery.

Council will provide opportunities for the local community to comment on the performance of Council through methods such as the annual community survey, receiving customer feedback and complaints, and from various other avenues.

Council will continue to receive feedback from the public on Council projects, policies or plans after they have begun.

4.2 *Assessing performance*

When such information is gathered, Council is responsible for assessing its processes in relation to its performance targets and implementing any necessary changes to improve Council's performance. Council will also revise its performance targets regularly and ensure they are in line with community expectations.



4.3 Record Keeping

Council is responsible for maintaining community databases and appropriately recording and filing results from community consultation and feedback from the community.

5. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

5.1 Internal communication between Council staff and Council departments is essential for providing effective services to the community. In particular, internal communication results in improved information flows and results in staff being made aware of the status of projects and requests for service as they progress through Council.

On a broader level, internal communication ensures that all members of staff are familiar with Council's goals and what Council wants to achieve for the Municipality and facilitates, a coordinated team approach to delivering Council services and initiatives.

5.2 Methods of communication between Council staff include:

- a) effective file notes recorded for the information of other staff
- b) monthly newsletter 'What's On' listing activities and functions of Council for the information of Councillors and staff
- c) use of Council email
- d) staff meetings
- e) internal memos
- f) common access Council databases.



RELATED RESOURCES

Hunter's Hill Council Access to and Use of Internet and Email Policy (HR-Pol.14)

Hunter's Hill Council Access to Information and Access to Information Held by Council Policy (CORP.S-Pol.21)

Hunter's Hill Council Code of Conduct (CORP.S-Pol.03)

Hunter's Hill Council Complaints Handling Policy (CORP.S-Pol.22)

Hunter's Hill Council Development Control Plan No. 20 – Notifications Policy

Hunter's Hill Council Media Policy (CORP.S-Pol.18)

POLICY OWNER

The policy authority is the General Manager.

AUTHORISATION AND REVIEW

Next Review Date

This policy is to be reviewed in 2013.

Version Control Table

| Date | Version | Res. No. | Key Changes | Author |
|------------|---------|--|--|----------|
| 10.09.2001 | 1.0 | 408/01 | Policy adoption | B. Smith |
| 26.06.2006 | 1.1 | 263/06 | | B. Smith |
| 28.10.2011 | 1.2 | 358/11 GM delegated authority | Amendments to change Council structure and position names and titles | B. Smith |