

Customer Complaints Handling Policy

September 2025

Version: 5



City of
Newcastle

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Part A - Preliminary

1 Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of this Policy is to ensure that City of Newcastle (**CN**) handles Customer Complaints fairly, efficiently and effectively by:
 - 1.1.1 responding in a timely, consistent and cost-effective way to issues raised by members of the public making a Customer Complaint;
 - 1.1.2 boosting public confidence and perception of the quality of the services provided by CN; and
 - 1.1.3 using complaint information to generate insights and inform quality improvements in services, information, and Customer Complaint handling.

2 Principles

- 2.1 CN commits itself to the following principles in managing Customer Complaints:
 - 2.1.1 **Accountability and transparency** - The Policy provides a framework for ensuring all Customer Complaints are dealt with in a systematic and consistent manner, transparent to both the person making the Customer Complaint and CN staff.
 - 2.1.2 **Timeliness** - Providing prompt acknowledgement and resolution of Customer Complaints.
 - 2.1.3 **Prudence** - Acknowledging the need to appropriately use CN resources in the handling of Customer Complaints.
 - 2.1.4 **Objectivity** - Ensuring Customer Complaints are addressed in a fair and unbiased manner. CN will ensure that the person handling a Customer Complaint is independent from any staff member whose conduct or service is the subject of the Customer Complaint. This ensures that any conflicts of interest, whether actual or perceived, will be managed in accordance with relevant CN policies.

3 Scope

- 3.1 A **Customer Complaint** is an expression of dissatisfaction lodged with CN about CN, our services, our staff, or the handling of a Customer Complaint (other than those detailed in clause 3.4), communicated by a member of the public where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or required.

It can be expressed in relation to:

- 3.1.1 failure to achieve specified standards of service;
- 3.1.2 delay in responding;
- 3.1.3 standard or level of service provided by CN or a CN employee;
- 3.1.4 processes and procedures; and/or
- 3.1.5 extended or permanent withdrawal or reduction of service.

3.2 What is not a Customer Complaint for the purposes of this Policy:

- 3.2.1 Service Requests (e.g. missed waste collection, requesting tree maintenance, or road resurfacing, etc.);
- 3.2.2 requests for explanations of policy or procedure;
- 3.2.3 reports of damaged or faulty infrastructure (e.g. road pothole, damaged bus shelter, etc.) or hazards (e.g. fallen tree branch, broken playground equipment, uneven footpath, etc);
- 3.2.4 reports concerning neighbours or neighbouring property (e.g. noise, unauthorised building works, etc.);
- 3.2.5 issues that are outside of CN's jurisdiction, including but not limited to State or Federal Government decisions;
- 3.2.6 concerns about adopted CN policies;
- 3.2.7 the lodgment of an appeal or objection in accordance with a standard procedure or policy (e.g. objection to a Development Application, comments on a matter on Public Exhibition);
- 3.2.8 requests to review a Penalty Notice where it is believed the penalty was not issued correctly or there are extenuating circumstances;
- 3.2.9 claims for compensation (e.g. from alleged personal injury or damages) and the subsequent legal decisions; or
- 3.2.10 feedback.

3.3 Case study: *understanding what is and isn't a complaint*

3.3.1 Example: A resident submits a request to repair an uneven footpath outside their home, noting it as a potential trip hazard. They are seeking rectification.

This is a Service Request.

If the resident follows up several weeks later as they have not received an update on the proposed approach to address the issue, and they are concerned about the risk to public safety, this would constitute a Customer Complaint due to inaction and a lack of communication.

3.4 This Policy does not cover other categories of complaints that are:

- 3.4.1 staff grievances;
- 3.4.2 Public Interest Disclosures;
- 3.4.3 complaints against Councillors; or
- 3.4.4 Code of Conduct complaints against staff, Councillors or members of Council committees.

3.5 Where a complaint received by CN falls into one of the categories listed in clause 3.4, it will be dealt with in accordance with grievance procedure, Public Interest Disclosures (Internal Reporting) Policy, CN's Codes of Conduct, or in accordance with relevant legislation or other relevant CN Policy.

3.6 Complaints regarding decisions made by the elected Council

Decisions of the elected Council are made in accordance with legislation and therefore are not subject to reversal or challenge through the complaints process. However, CN understands that some members of the community may not agree with decisions made by the elected Council and appreciates that understanding this feedback is valuable and contributes to ongoing transparency and accountability. These complaints will be acknowledged and reviewed, and a summary of the complaints will be shared with Councillors on a regular basis. Should complainants remain dissatisfied, the external agencies listed in **Annexure C** are available for advice or to lodge complaints.

Part B - Our Commitment to Handling Customer Complaints

4 Making a Customer Complaint

Lodging a Customer Complaint

- 4.1 CN encourages that a person making a Customer Complaint do so in writing to ensure we have all the relevant information and facts.
- 4.2 Customer Complaints can be made in writing via our specific Customer Complaints form, which is located on the CN website. If a person has difficulty making a Customer Complaint in writing, they should speak to our Customer Service Centre on 4974 2000.
- 4.3 CN understands that in some circumstances other channels beyond the complaints form for lodging a Customer Complaint may be preferred or required, in which case we can also accept Customer Complaints via the following channels:

Post: PO Box 489 NEWCASTLE NSW 2300

Telephone: 02 4974 2000

In person: City Administration Centre, 12 Stewart Avenue Newcastle West.

- 4.4 If a person prefers or needs another person or organisation to assist in lodging the complaint or represent them in the making of their Customer Complaint, CN will communicate with them through their representative if requested. Anyone may represent a person making a Customer Complaint with their consent (e.g. advocate, family member, legal or community representative, member of Parliament, another organisation).

Anonymous Complaints

- 4.5 CN recognises that in some instances, anonymous complaints may raise legitimate concerns or provide valuable information about our services or operations. Where sufficient information is provided to allow for assessment or investigation, anonymous correspondence will be treated as a Customer Complaint under this Policy and managed in accordance with the same principles.

Acknowledgment

- 4.6 CN will assess and prioritise Customer Complaints in accordance with the urgency and/or seriousness of the issues raised. If a matter concerns an immediate risk to safety or security, it will be escalated immediately.

- 4.7 CN will acknowledge receipt of each complaint in writing (typically via email) within **three working days**, which will include a reference number.

5 Initial Assessment and Addressing Complaints

Initial Assessment

- 5.1 CN will first confirm if the submission meets the criteria of a Customer Complaint under this Policy. Customer Complaints will then be assessed as to seriousness, complexity and urgency. CN will ensure complaints, where appropriate, are assessed on their merits, with a view to addressing the concerns raised in a customer-centric and transparent manner.

Managing Complaints

- 5.2 To manage the complaint, CN may:
- 5.2.1 give the person making a complaint information or an explanation; and/or
 - 5.2.2 gather information from CN employee/s or area that the complaint is about.
- 5.3 CN will keep the person making the complaint informed on progress if the investigation will require more time than indicated under 5.4.

Responding to Customer Complaints

- 5.4 Following consideration of the Customer Complaint and any investigation into the issues raised, CN will contact the person making the Customer Complaint using the most appropriate medium within **15 working days** and advise them of:
- 5.4.1 the outcome of the Customer Complaint and any action taken;
 - 5.4.2 the reason/s for the decision;
 - 5.4.3 the remedy or resolution/s that CN propose to put in place, where relevant; and
 - 5.4.4 options for review.

6 Privacy

- 6.1 Personal information that identifies the person making the Customer Complaint will be managed in accordance with CN's Privacy Management Plan and relevant legislation.
- 6.2 CN will take all reasonable steps to ensure that people making complaints are not adversely affected because a complaint has been made by them or on their behalf.

7 Review Options

- 7.1 Where the person making a Customer Complaint is dissatisfied with the outcome of CN's decision about their Customer Complaint (Level 1 Complaint); they may seek:
- 7.1.1 an **internal review** (Level 2 Complaint) - this will be conducted by a more senior staff member independent of the original decision. Where there are no senior staff members independent of the decision, the Public Officer will conduct the review; or

- 7.1.2 an **external review** (Level 3 Complaint) - CN will advise the person making the Customer Complaint of appropriate options available for an external review of our response directly with the agencies listed at **Annexure C**.

8 Unreasonable Complainant Conduct

- 8.1 CN is committed to the safety and wellbeing of our staff.
- 8.2 When members of the public behave unreasonably in their dealings with us, their conduct can significantly affect the progress and efficiency of our work. As a result, CN will take proactive action under the Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Policy and Procedure.

Part C - Roles and Responsibilities

9 Executive Manager Customer Experience

- 9.1 The Executive Manager Customer Experience has the responsibility and authority to ensure the acknowledgement and initial assessment of complaints is conducted as per this Policy.

10 Executive Managers

- 10.1 Executive Managers are responsible for ensuring Customer Complaints are managed appropriately and responded to within the timeframes established in this Policy.

11 Executive Directors

- 11.1 Executive Directors may conduct an internal review of a complaint (Level 2 Complaint) under section 7 of this Policy, so long as they were not involved in the original decision.

12 Public Officer

- 12.1 The Public Officer may conduct an internal review of a complaint (Level 2 Complaint) under Section 7 of this Policy, where the relevant senior manager was involved in the original decision.

Annexure A - Definitions

CEO means Chief Executive Officer of City of Newcastle and includes their delegate or authorised representative.

References to the Chief Executive Officer are references to the General Manager appointed under the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW).

City of Newcastle (CN) means the administration including all employees who are not elected Councillors.

Complainant means the person initiating the Complaint.

Council means the elected Council.

Customer Complaint means an expression of dissatisfaction lodged with CN about CN, CN's services, CN's staff, or the handling of a complaint (other than those detailed in clause 3.4), communicated by a member of the public where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or required.

Feedback means opinions, comments and expressions of interest or concern, made directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, to or about CN, CN's services or complaint handling, where a response is not explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

Level 1 Complaint means the first instance of a Customer Complaint received and handled by CN.

Level 2 Complaint means an internal review by CN of a Level 1 Complaint and / or complaint handling where the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome.

Level 3 Complaint means an external review of a complaint and / or complaint handling by an independent agency where the complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of CN's review of their complaint.

Review is an impartial review of a decision about a complaint by an employee who was not the original decision-maker.

Service Request means a request initiated by a customer for an action to be undertaken OR information to be provided by CN.

Unless stated otherwise, a reference to a section or clause is a reference to a section or clause of this Policy.

Annexure B - Policy Authorisations

This Policy Authorisation may be updated and amended by the CEO from time to time.

In accordance with section 378 of the *Local Government Act 1993*, the Chief Executive Officer delegates the following functions to the positions listed:

Title of Authorisation	Description of Authorisation	Position Number and Title
Nil		

Annexure C - External Agency Contact Details

Customers are welcome to seek advice or lodge complaints with external agencies. Find below some relevant contact details:

Office of Local Government

Street Address

5 O'Keeffe Avenue
NOWRA NSW 2541

Postal Address

Locked Bag 3015
NOWRA NSW 2541
P 02 4428 4100
TTY 02 4428 4209

E olg@olg.nsw.gov.au
W www.olg.nsw.gov.au

NSW Ombudsman

Level 24, 580 George Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
P 02 9286 1000
E nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au
W www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

Independent Commission Against Corruption

Level 7, 255 Elizabeth Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000
P 02 8281 5999
F 02 9264 5364
TTY 02 8281 5773
E icac@icac.nsw.gov.au
W www.icac.nsw.gov.au

Document Control

Policy Title:	Customer Complaints Handling Policy
Audience:	CN Staff, Community
Service Unit:	Customer Experience
Policy Owner:	Executive Manager Customer & Transformation
Policy Writer:	Customer Insight & Improvement Manager
Associated Procedure Title (if applicable):	Customer Complaints Handling Procedure
Approved By:	CEO
Date Approved:	10 September 2025
Commencement Date:	10 September 2025
Next Scheduled Review Date:	30 April 2028
Termination Date:	30 April 2029
Version:	Version 5
Required on Website:	Yes
Key Words:	Customer, complaints, handling, public officer, dissatisfaction

Related Document Information, Standards & References

Context:	This Policy supports CN's compliance with the Local Government Act 1993 and Government Information Public Access Act 2009
Relevant Legislation:	Local Government Act 1993 Government Information Public Access Act 2009
Related Policies (Council & Internal):	Code of Conduct for Staff Public Interest Disclosures (Internal Reporting) Policy
Related Procedures, Guidelines, Forms or documents:	Customer Complaint or Feedback Form on CN's website

Standards, Codes or other references:	<p>Effective Complaint Handling Guidelines - NSW Ombudsman (2024)</p> <p>Complaint Management Framework and Complaint Handling Model Policy - NSW Ombudsman (2015)</p> <p>Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Model Policy - NSW Ombudsman (2021)</p> <p>Practice Note No.9 - Complaints Management in Councils - Division of Local Government (July 2009)</p> <p>AS/NZS10002:2014 - Guidelines for complaint management in organisations</p> <p>Personal and Privacy Information Protection Act 1998 (NSW)</p>
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Relevant Newcastle 2040 Theme/s

Term / Abbreviation
Achieving Together

Version History

Version No - Date Approved - ECM
Version 1 - Complaints Handling Policy (2010) - ECM: 3431101, Version 2 - Complaints Handling Policy (2012) - ECM: 3548140, Version 3 - Customer Complaints Handling Policy (2016) - ECM: 4995145, Version 4 - Customer Complaints Handling Policy (2021) - ECM 7157847