



DATE ADOPTED: 24 OCTOBER 2023

VERSION: 3.0

POLICY OBJECTIVES

The policy has been developed to assist all staff members to better manage unreasonable conduct by complainants ('UCC'). It aims to help staff:

- feel confident and supported in taking action to manage UCC
- act fairly, consistently, honestly, and appropriately when responding to UCC
- understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to the management of UCC, and how this policy will be used
- understand the types of circumstances when it may be appropriate to manage UCC using one or more of the following mechanisms:
 - the strategies provided in the 'Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant manual' (3rd edition) including the strategies to change or restrict a complainant's access to our services
 - alternative dispute resolution strategies to deal with conflicts involving complainants and Council
 - legal instruments such as trespass laws or other legislation to prevent a complainant from coming onto our premises, and orders to protect specific staff members from any actual or apprehended personal violence, intimidation, or stalking
- understand the criteria we will consider before we decide to change or restrict a complainant's access to our services
- be aware of the processes that will be followed to record and report UCC incidents, and the procedures for consulting and notifying complainants about any proposed action or decision to change or restrict their access to our services
- understand the procedures for reviewing decisions made under this policy, including specific timeframes for review.

This policy is based on the NSW Ombudsman's 'Managing unreasonable conduct by complainants' model policy.

POLICY SCOPE

This policy applies to all situations involving UCC experienced by Council staff at Council premises and by Council staff in the performance of their official duties, whether or not this takes place at Council premises.

POLICY STATEMENT

1. STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

Maitland City Council is committed to being accessible and responsive to all complainants who approach Council regardless of ethnic identity, national origin, religion, linguistic background, sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, physical ability or other cultural or personal factors.

At the same time, the success of Council depends on:

- our ability to do our work in the most effective and efficient ways possible
- the health, safety, and security of our staff
- our ability to allocate our resources fairly across all the complaints we receive.

When complainants behave unreasonably, their conduct can significantly affect the successful conduct of our work. Council will act proactively and decisively to manage any complainant conduct that negatively and unreasonably affects Council and will support our staff to do the same in accordance with this policy.

2. DEFINING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT CONDUCT

2.1. Unreasonable complainant conduct

Unreasonable conduct by a complainant is any behaviour by a current or former complainant which, because of its nature or frequency raises substantial health, safety, resource or equity issues for Council, our staff, other service users and complainants or the complainant themselves.

UCC can be divided into five categories of conduct:

- unreasonable persistence
- unreasonable demands
- unreasonable lack of cooperation
- unreasonable arguments
- unreasonable behaviours.

2.2. Unreasonable persistence

Unreasonable persistence is continued, incessant and unrelenting conduct by a complainant that has a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on Council, staff, services, time, or resources. Some examples of unreasonably persistent behaviour include:

- An unwillingness or inability to accept reasonable and logical explanations, including final decisions that have been comprehensively considered and dealt with (even when it is evident the complainant does understand the information provided).
- Persistently demanding a review simply because it is available, and without arguing or presenting a case for one.
- Pursuing and exhausting all available review options, even after Council has explained that a review is not warranted – and refusing to accept that we cannot or will not take further action on their complaint.
- Reframing a complaint in an effort to get it taken up again.
- Multiple and repeated phone calls, visits, letters, emails (including cc'd correspondence) after being repeatedly asked not to.
- Contacting different people within Council, through Council social media channels, and externally to get a different outcome or a more sympathetic response to their complaint – this is known as internal and external 'forum shopping'.

2.3. Unreasonable demands

Unreasonable demands are any demands expressly made by a complainant that have a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on Council, staff, services, time, or resources. Some examples of unreasonable demands include:

- Issuing instructions and making demands about how to handle their complaint, the priority it should be given, or the outcome to be achieved.
- Insisting on talking to a senior manager or the General Manager personally when the reasons that this is not appropriate or warranted, and this has been carefully explained to the complainant.



- Emotional blackmail and manipulation resulting in intimidation, harassment, shaming, seduction or portraying themselves as being victimised when this is not the case.
- Insisting on outcomes that are not possible or appropriate in the circumstances, for example asking for someone to be fired or prosecuted, or for an apology or compensation when there is no reasonable basis for this.
- Demanding services of a nature or scale that Council cannot provide, even after this has been explained to them repeatedly.

2.4. Unreasonable lack of cooperation

Unreasonable lack of cooperation is when a complainant is unwilling or unable to cooperate with Council staff or the complaints process – resulting in a disproportionate and unreasonable use of Council services, time, or resources. Some examples of unreasonable lack of cooperation include:

- Sending a constant stream of complex or disorganised information without clearly defining the issue at hand or explaining how the material provided relates to their complaint (where the complainant is clearly capable of doing this).
- Providing little or no detail around their complaint or providing information in ‘drips and drabs’.
- Refusing to follow or accept instructions, suggestions, or advice without a clear or justifiable reason for doing so.
- Arguing that a particular solution is the correct one in the face of valid contrary arguments and explanations.
- Unhelpful behaviour such as withholding information, acting dishonestly and misquoting others.

2.5. Unreasonable arguments

Unreasonable arguments include any arguments that are not based on any reason or logic, that are incomprehensible, false, or inflammatory, trivial, or delirious, and that disproportionately and unreasonably impact upon Council, staff, services, time, or resources. Arguments are unreasonable when they:

- fail to follow a logical sequence that the complainant is able to explain to staff
- are not supported by any evidence or are based on conspiracy theories.
- lead a complainant to reject all other valid and contrary arguments
- are trivial when compared to the amount of time, resources, and attention that the complainant demands
- are false, inflammatory, or defamatory.

2.6. Unreasonable behaviour

Unreasonable behaviour is conduct that is unreasonable in all circumstances (regardless of how stressed, angry, or frustrated a complainant is) because it unreasonably compromises the health, safety and security of staff, other service users or the complainant themselves. Some examples of unreasonable behaviours include:

- acts of aggression, verbal abuse, derogatory, racist, or grossly defamatory remarks
- harassment, intimidation, or physical violence
- rude, confronting, or threatening correspondence
- threats of harm to self or third parties, threats with a weapon or threats to damage property, including bomb threats
- stalking in person or online
- emotional manipulation.

Maitland City Council has a zero-tolerance policy towards any harm, abuse or threats directed toward Council staff. Any conduct of this kind will be dealt with under this policy, and in accordance with our duty of care and work health and safety responsibilities.

3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1. All Staff

All staff are responsible for familiarising themselves with this policy. Staff are also encouraged to explain the contents of this document to all complainants, particularly those who engage in UCC or exhibit the early warning signs of UCC.

Any strategies that change or restrict a complainant's access to our services must be considered at the Public Officer or higher as provided in this policy.

Staff are also responsible for recording and reporting all UCC incidents they experience or witness (as appropriate) to the Public Officer within 24 hours of the incident occurring, using the Sample UCC incident form in **Appendix B**. A file note of the incident should also be copied into Council's Corporate Information System.

3.2. The Public Officer

The Public Officer, in consultation with relevant staff, has the responsibility and authority to change or restrict a complainant's access to our services in the circumstances identified in this policy. When doing so they will consider the criteria in **section 5.2** below and will aim to impose any service changes or restrictions in the least restrictive ways possible. Their aim when taking such actions will not be to punish the complainant, but rather to manage the impacts of their conduct.

When applying this policy, the Public Officer will also aim to keep at least one open line of communication with a complainant. However, we do recognise that in extreme situations all forms of contact may need to be restricted for some time to ensure the health, safety, and security of our staff or third parties.

The Public Officer is also responsible for recording, monitoring, and reviewing all cases where this policy is applied to ensure consistency, transparency, and accountability for the application of this policy. They will manage and keep a file record of all cases where this policy is applied.

3.3. Executive Leadership Team and Managers

The Executive Leadership Team and managers are responsible for supporting staff to apply the strategies in this policy, as well as those in the manual. Managers are also responsible for ensuring compliance with the procedures outlined in this policy, and that all staff members are trained to deal with UCC – including on induction.

Following UCC and/or stressful interaction with a complainant, managers are responsible for providing affected staff members with the opportunity to debrief their concerns either formally or informally. Managers will also ensure that staff are provided with proper support and assistance including medical and/or police assistance, and if necessary, support through programs like the Employee Assistance Program.

Depending on the circumstances, senior managers may also be responsible for arranging other forms of support for staff, such as appropriate communication or intercultural training.

4. RESPONDING TO AND MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT CONDUCT

4.1. Changing or restricting a complainant's access to Council services

UCC incidents will generally be managed by limiting or adapting the ways we interact with or deliver services to complainants by restricting:

- **Who they have contact with** – limiting a complainant to a sole contact person or staff member at Council.
- **What they can raise with Council** – restricting the subject matter of communications that Council will consider and respond to.
- **When they can have contact** – limiting a complainant's contact with Council to a particular time, day, or length of time, or curbing the frequency of their contact with Council.



- **Where they can make contact** – limiting the locations where Council will conduct face-to-face interviews to secured facilities or areas of the office.
- **How they can make contact** – limiting or modifying the forms of contact that the complainant can have with Council. This can include modifying or limiting face-to-face interviews, telephone, and written communications, prohibiting access to our premises, contact through a representative only, taking no further action or terminating provision of services altogether.

When using the restrictions provided in this section, Council recognises that discretion will need to be used to adapt them to suit a complainant's personal circumstances such as level of competency, literacy skills, and cultural background. In this regard, we also recognise that more than one strategy may be needed in individual cases to ensure their appropriateness and efficacy.

4.2. Who – limiting the complainant to a sole contact point

Where a complainant tries to forum-shop within Council, changes their issues of complaint repeatedly, constantly reframes their complaint, or raises an excessive number of complaints, it may be appropriate to restrict their access to a single staff member (a sole contact point) who will manage their complaint(s) and interaction with our office. This may help ensure they are dealt with consistently and may minimise the incidence of misunderstandings, contradictions, and manipulation.

Complainants who are restricted to a sole contact person will, however, be given the contact details of one additional staff member who they can contact if their primary contact is unavailable – for example if they go on leave or are otherwise unavailable for an extended period of time.

4.3. What – restricting the subject matter of communications that Council will consider

Where complainants repeatedly send letters, emails, live chats or online forms that raise trivial or insignificant issues, contain inappropriate or abusive content, or relate to an issue that has already been comprehensively considered or reviewed (at least once) by Council, Council may restrict the issues the complainant can raise with Council. For example, we may:

- Refuse to respond to correspondence that raises an issue that has already been dealt with, that raises a trivial issue, or is not supported by evidence. The complainant will be advised that future correspondence of this kind will be read and filed without acknowledgement unless we decide that we need to pursue it further.
- Restrict the complainant to one complaint or issue per month. Any attempts to circumvent this restriction (for example by raising multiple complaints or issues in the one letter) may result in modifications or further restrictions being placed on their access.
- Return the correspondence to the complainant and require them to remove any inappropriate content before we agree to consider its contents. A copy of the inappropriate correspondence will also be made and kept for our records to help identify repeat UCC incidents.

4.4. When and how – limiting when and how a complainant can contact Council

If a complainant's contact with Council places an unreasonable demand on our time or resources, or affects the health, safety, and security of our staff because it involves behaviour that is persistently rude, threatening, abusive or aggressive, Council may limit when or how the complainant can interact with Council. This may include:

- Limiting their telephone calls or face-to-face interviews to a particular time of the day or days of the week.
- Limiting the length or duration of telephone calls, written correspondence, or face-to-face interviews. For example:
 - Telephone calls may be limited to ten [10] minutes at a time and will be politely terminated at the end of that time period.
 - Lengthy written communications may be restricted to a maximum of five [5] typed or written pages, single sided, font size 12 or it will be sent back to the complainant to be organised and summarised – this option



is only appropriate in cases where the complainant is capable of summarising the information and refuses to do so.

- Limiting face-to-face interviews to a maximum of [30] minutes.
- Limiting the frequency of their telephone calls, written correspondence, or face-to-face interviews. Depending on the natures of the service(s) provided we may limit:
 - Telephone calls to [1] every 2 weeks.
 - Written communications to [1] every 2 weeks.
 - Face-to-face interviews to [1] every 2 months.

For irrelevant, overly lengthy, disorganised or very frequent written correspondence we may also:

- Require the complainant to clearly identify how the information or supporting materials they have sent to Council relate to the central issues that we have identified in their complaint.
- Restrict the frequency with which complainants can send emails or other written communications to Council.
- Restrict a complainant to sending emails to a particular email account (e.g., the organisation's main email account) or block their email access altogether and require that any further correspondence be mailed only.

Writing only restrictions

When a complainant is restricted to 'writing only' they may be restricted to written communications through:

- Mailed only
- Email only to a specific staff email or our general Council email account
- Some other relevant form of written contact, where applicable.

If a complainant's contact is restricted to writing only, the Public Officer will clearly identify the specific means that the complainant can use to contact Council (e.g., mail only). If it is not appropriate for a complainant to enter our premises to hand deliver their written communication this must be communicated to them as well.

Any communications received by Council in a manner that contravenes a 'writing only' restriction will either be returned to the complainant or read and filed without acknowledgement.

4.5. Where – limiting face-to-face interviews to secure areas

If a complainant is violent or overtly aggressive, unreasonably disruptive, threatening or demanding or makes frequent unannounced visits to Council premises, we may consider restricting our face-to-face contact with them.

These restrictions can include:

- Restricting access to particular secured premises or areas of the office such as the foyer area or a secured room/facility.
- Restricting their ability to attend our premises to specified times of the day or days of the week only – for example, when additional security is available or to times or days that are less busy.
- Allowing them to attend Council on an 'appointment only' basis, and only with specified staff.
- Banning the complainant from attending our premises altogether and allowing some other form of contact, e.g., 'writing only' or 'telephone only' contact.

Contact through a representative only

In cases where Council cannot completely restrict contact with a complainant and their conduct is particularly difficult to manage, Council may require them to make contact through a support person or representative only. The support person may be someone nominated by the complainant, but they must be approved by the Public Officer.

When assessing a representative or support person's suitability, the Public Officer should consider factors such as their level of competency and literacy skills, demeanour and behaviour, and relationship with the complainant. If the Public Officer determines that the representative or support person may exacerbate the situation with the complainant, the complainant will be asked to nominate another person and we may assist them in this regard.

4.6. Completely terminating a complainant's access to Council services

In rare cases, and as a last resort when all other strategies have been considered, the Public Officer and the General Manager may decide that it is necessary for Council to completely restrict a complainant's contact or access to Council services.

A decision to have no further contact with a complainant will only be made if it appears that the complainant is unlikely to modify their conduct, or their conduct poses a significant risk for our staff or other parties because it involves one or more of the following:

- Acts of aggression, verbal or physical abuse, threats of harm, harassment, intimidation, stalking, assault.
- Damage to property while on our premises.
- Threats with a weapon or common office items that can be used to harm another person or themselves.
- Physically preventing a staff member from moving around freely either within their office or during an off-site visit.
- Conduct that is otherwise unlawful.

In these cases, the complainant will be sent a letter notifying them that their access has been restricted as outlined in **section 5.4** below.

A complainant's access to Council services and premises may also be restricted (directly or indirectly) using legal mechanisms like trespass laws and other legislation or legal orders to protect members of our staff from personal violence, intimidation or stalking by a complainant.

4.7. Using alternative dispute resolution strategies to manage conflicts with complainants

If the Public Officer and the General Manager determine that Council cannot terminate our services to a complainant in a particular case or that we or our staff bear some responsibility for causing or exacerbating their conduct, they may consider using alternative dispute resolution strategies ('ADRs') such as mediation and conciliation to resolve the conflict with the complainant and attempt to rebuild our relationship with them. If an ADR is considered to be an appropriate option in a particular case, it will be conducted by an independent third party to ensure transparency and impartiality.

However, we recognise that in UCC situations an ADR may not be an appropriate or effective strategy – particularly if the complainant is uncooperative or resistant to compromise. Therefore, each case will be assessed on its own facts to determine the appropriateness of this approach.

5. PROCEDURE TO BE FOLLOWED WHEN CHANGING OR RESTRICTING A COMPLAINANT'S ACCESS TO OUR SERVICES

5.1. Consulting with relevant staff

When the Public Officer receives a UCC incident form from a staff member, they will contact the staff member to discuss the incident. They will discuss:

- The circumstances that gave rise to the UCC incident, including the complainant's situation, personal and cultural background, and perspective.
- The impact of the complainant's conduct on Council, relevant staff, our time, resources etc.
- The complainant's response to the staff member's warnings or requests to stop the unreasonable behaviour.
- What the staff member has done to manage the complainant's conduct (if applicable).
- Any suggestions made by relevant staff on ways that the situation could be managed



5.2. Criteria to be considered

Following a consultation with relevant staff the Public Officer will search the Corporate Information System for information about the complainant's prior conduct and history with Council. They will also consider the following criteria:

- Whether the conduct in question involved overt anger, aggression, violence, or assault (which is unacceptable in all circumstances).
- Whether the complainant's case has merit.
- The likelihood that the complainant will modify their unreasonable conduct if they are given a formal warning about their conduct.
- Whether changing or restricting access to our services will be effective in managing the complainant's behaviour.
- Whether changing or restricting access to our services will affect the complainant's ability to meet their obligations, such as reporting obligations.
- Whether changing or restricting access to our services will have an undue impact on the complainant's welfare, livelihood, or dependents etc.
- Whether the complainant's personal circumstances have contributed to the behaviour – For example, the complainant's cultural background may mean their communication patterns differ from those of our staff or Council's standards, or the complainant is a vulnerable person who is under significant stress as a result of one or more of the following:
 - homelessness
 - physical disability
 - illiteracy or other language or communication barrier
 - mental or other illness
 - personal crises
 - substance or alcohol abuse.
- Whether the complainant's response or conduct was moderately disproportionate, grossly disproportionate, or not at all disproportionate in the circumstances.
- Whether there are any statutory provisions that would limit the types of limitations that can be applied to the complainant's contact with, or access to our services.

Once the Public Officer has considered these criteria, they will decide on the appropriate course of action. They may suggest formal or informal options for dealing with the complainant's conduct which may include one or more of the strategies provided in the manual and this policy.

5.3. Providing a warning letter

Unless a complainant's conduct poses a substantial risk to the health and safety of staff or other third parties, the Public Officer will provide them with a written warning about their conduct in the first instance. If the complainant is unable to read the letter, it will be followed/accompanied by a telephone call, using an interpreter if necessary.

The warning letter will:

- Specify the date, time, and location of the UCC incident(s).
- Explain why the complainant's conduct/UCC incident is problematic.
- List the types of access changes and/or restrictions that may be imposed if the behaviour continues. (Note: not every possible restriction should be listed but only those that are most relevant).
- Provide clear and full reasons for the warning being given
- Include an attachment of the organisation's ground rules and/or briefly state the standard of behaviour that is expected of the complainant.
- Provide the name and contact details of the staff member who they can contact about the letter.
- Be signed by the Public Officer or preferably the General Manager.

5.4. Providing a notification letter

If a complainant's conduct continues after they have been given a written warning or in extreme cases of overt aggression, violence, assault, or other unlawful/unacceptable conduct, the Public Officer has the discretion to send a notification letter immediately restricting the complainant's access to our services (without prior or further written warning). If the complainant is unable to read the letter (due to literacy issues, non-English speaking, etc.) the letter will be followed or accompanied by a telephone call, using an interpreter if necessary.

This notification letter will:

- Specify the date, time, and location of the UCC incident(s).
- Explain why the complainant's conduct is problematic.
- Identify the change and/or restriction that will be imposed and what it means for the complainant.
- Provide clear and full reasons for this restriction.
- Specify the duration of the change or restriction imposed, which will not exceed 12 months.
- Indicate a time period for review.
- Provide the name and contact details of the senior officer who they can contact about the letter and/or request a review of the decision.
- Be signed by the Public Officer or preferably the General Manager.

5.5. Notifying relevant staff about access changes/restrictions

The Public Officer will notify relevant staff about any decisions to change or restrict a complainant's access to our services, in particular reception and security staff in cases where a complainant is prohibited from entering our premises.

The Public Officer will also update the UCC Register with a record outlining the nature of the restriction imposed and its duration.

5.6. Continued monitoring/oversight responsibilities

Once a complainant has been issued with a warning letter or notification letter the Public Officer will review the complainant's record/restriction every 6 months, on request by a staff member, or following any further incidents of UCC that involve the particular complainant to ensure that they are complying with the restrictions/the arrangement is working.

If the Public Officer determines that the restrictions have been ineffective in managing the complainant's conduct or are otherwise inappropriate, they may decide to either modify the restrictions, impose further restrictions, or terminate the complainant's access to our services altogether.

6. NON-COMPLIANCE WITH A CHANGE OR RESTRICTION ON ACCESS TO COUNCIL SERVICES

6.1. Recording and reporting incidents of non-compliance

All staff members are responsible for recording and reporting incidents of non-compliance by complainants. This should be recorded in a file note in the Corporate Information System and a copy forwarded to the Public Officer who will decide whether any action needs to be taken to modify or further restrict the complainant's access to our services.

7. PERIODIC REVIEWS OF ALL CASES WHERE THIS POLICY IS APPLIED

7.1. Period for review

All cases where this policy is used will be reviewed every 6 months after the service change or restriction was initially imposed or upheld.

7.2. Notifying the complainant of an upcoming review

The Public Officer will ask complainants if they would like to participate in the review process unless they determine that this invitation will provoke a negative response from the complainant (i.e., further UCC). The invitation will be given, and the review will be conducted in accordance with the complainant's access restrictions.

7.3. Criteria to be considered during a review

When conducting a review, the Public Officer will consider:

- Whether the complainant has had any contact with the organisation during the restriction period.
- The complainant's conduct during the restriction period.
- Any information or arguments put forward by the complainant for review.
- Any other information that may be relevant in the circumstances.

The Public Officer may also consult any staff members who have had contact with the complainant during the restriction period.

Sometimes a complainant may not have a reason to contact our office during their restriction period. As a result, a review decision that is based primarily on the fact that the complainant has not contacted Council during their restriction period may not be an accurate representation of their level of compliance/reformed behaviour. This should be taken into consideration, in relevant situations.

7.4. Notifying a complainant of the outcome of a review

The Public Officer will tell the complainant the outcome of their review using an appropriate method of communication, as well as a written letter explaining the outcome. The review letter will:

- Briefly explain the review process.
- Identify the factors that have been considered during the review.
- Explain the decision or outcome of the review and the reasons for it.

If the outcome of the review is to maintain or modify the restriction, the review letter will also:

- Indicate the nature of the new or continued restriction.
- State the duration of the new restriction period.
- Provide the name and contact details of the Public Officer who the complainant can contact to discuss the letter.
- Be signed by the Public Officer or preferably the General Manager.



7.5. Recording the outcome of a review and notifying relevant staff

Like all other decisions made under this policy, the Public Officer is responsible for keeping a record of the outcome of the review, updating Council's Corporate Information System and notifying all relevant staff of the outcome of the review including if the restriction has been withdrawn.

8. MANAGING STAFF STRESS

8.1. Staff reactions to stressful situations

Dealing with demanding, abusive, aggressive, or violent complainants can be extremely stressful, distressing and even frightening for our staff. It is perfectly normal to get upset or stressed when dealing with difficult situations.

As an organisation, we have a responsibility to support staff members who experience stress as a result of situations arising at work and we will do our best to provide staff with debriefing and counselling opportunities, when needed. However, to do this we also need the help of all Maitland City Council staff to identify stressful incidents and situations. All staff have a responsibility to tell relevant supervisors and senior managers about UCC incidents, and any other stressful incidents that they believe require management to be involved.

8.2. Debriefing

Debriefing means talking things through following a difficult or stressful incident. It is an important way of dealing with stress. Many staff do this naturally with colleagues after a difficult telephone call, but staff can also debrief with a supervisor or senior manager (or as a team) following a significant incident. We encourage all staff to engage in an appropriate level of debriefing, when necessary.

Staff may also access Council's Employee Assistance Program – a free, confidential counselling service.

9. TRAINING AND AWARENESS

Maitland City Council is committed to ensuring that all staff are aware of and know how to use this policy. All staff who deal with complainants in the course of their work will also receive appropriate training and information on using this policy and on managing UCC on a regular basis and, in particular, on induction. This should include training to support culturally appropriate communication.

10. OMBUDSMAN MAY REQUEST COPIES OF COUNCIL RECORDS

Council will keep records of all cases where this policy is applied, including a record of the total number of cases where it is used every year. This data may be requested by the Ombudsman to conduct an overall audit and review in accordance with its administrative functions and/or to inform its work on UCC.

11. VIOLENT, AGGRESSIVE AND THREATENING BEHAVIOUR

In situations where customers at Council premises become violent, aggressive, or threatening, Council staff should follow the Violent, aggressive and threatening behaviour by members of the public procedure. This procedure outlines a separate step by step process for dealing with an aggressive customer and dealing with a violent and threatening customer. If a situation with a violent, aggressive, or threatening customer needs to be escalated, a Council staff member should always contact their supervisor or manager to seek assistance. A number of Council staff have been given delegated authority to direct a customer to leave the Council premises.

If an aggressive or abusive situation occurs at external Council premises (for example library, art gallery, gaol, aquatic centres, and visitor information centre) and the delegated staff are unavailable, the most senior member of staff on duty at the time may direct the offending customer to leave the premises.

If the person when asked to leave remains on Council premises, the Officer is to contact the Police to attend and escort the person from the premises and advise the customer of this action.

DEFINITIONS

Customer	A customer expressing dissatisfaction with Council policy, procedure, action, or quality of service.
General Manager	A reference to the General Manager includes a reference to their delegate.
Public Officer	Council's delegated Public Officer under section 343 of the Act appointed by the General Manager, currently Manager Governance and Risk. Council officials acting in the role of Manager Governance and Risk will automatically assume the role of the delegate of Public Officer during the acting period.
Unreasonable arguments	Any arguments that are not based in reason or logic, that are incomprehensible, false, or inflammatory, trivial, or delirious and that disproportionately and unreasonably impact upon council, council officials, services, time and/or resources.
Unreasonable customer	A customer that has been declared unreasonable in accordance with this policy due to their UCC.
Unreasonable customer conduct	Any behaviour by a current or former customer which, because of its nature or frequency raises substantial health, safety, resource or equity issues for council, council official, other service users and customers or the customer themselves.
Unreasonable demands	Any demands (express or implied) that are made by a customer that have a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on council, council official, council services, time and/or resources allocated to deliver these services.
Unreasonable lack of cooperation	An unwillingness and/or inability by a customer to cooperate with council, council officials, or complaints system and processes that results in disproportionate and unreasonable use of council services, time and/or council resources.
Unreasonable persistence	Continued, incessant and unrelenting conduct by a customer that has a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on council, council officials, council services, time and/or resources allocated to deliver these services.
Violet, aggressive and threatening behaviour	Violent, aggressive, and threatening behaviour is defined as 'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work'. This can include, but is not limited to, verbal and written abuse; threats; aggressive behaviour such as shouting, swearing or badgering; harassment such as derogatory comments; or physical attacks such as pushing or striking.



POLICY ADMINISTRATION

BUSINESS GROUP:	Strategy, Performance and Business Systems
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:	Group Manager Strategy, Performance and Business Systems
COUNCIL REFERENCE:	Ordinary Council Meeting – 24 October 2023 – Item 11.2
POLICY REVIEW DATE:	Three (3) years from date of adoption
FILE NUMBER:	35/1, 130/24, 100/1
RELEVANT LEGISLATION	Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 Local Government Act 1993 Ombudsman Act 1974 Public Interest Disclosures Act 2022 Work Health and Safety Act 2011
RELATED POLICIES / PROCEDURES / PROTOCOLS	Code of Conduct Complaint Management Policy Public Interest Disclosure Policy Violet, Aggressive & Threatening Behaviour by Members of the Public Procedure Work Health & Safety Policy

POLICY HISTORY

VERSION	DATE APPROVED	DESCRIPTION OF CHANGES
1.0	8/3/2011	New policy to replace Complainants – Dealing with difficult & dealing with difficult customers policies.
2.0	22/3/2016	Periodic review to ensure compliance with NSW Ombudsman Model Policy.
3.0	24/10/2023	Periodic review to ensure compliance with NSW Ombudsman Model Policy.

Appendix A

Individual rights and mutual responsibilities of the parties to a complaint

In order for Maitland City Council to ensure that all complaints are dealt with fairly, efficiently, and effectively and that work health and safety standards and duty of care obligations are adhered to, the following rights and responsibilities must be observed and respected by all of the parties to the complaint process.

INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS¹

Complainants have the right:

- to make a complaint and to express their opinions in ways that are reasonable, lawful, and appropriate, regardless of cultural background, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender expression, disability or other cultural or personal characteristics²
- to a reasonable explanation in a wide range of languages of the organisation's complaints procedure, including details of the confidentiality, secrecy or privacy rights or obligations that may apply
- to a fair and impartial assessment and, where appropriate, investigation of their complaint based on the merits of the case³
- to a fair hearing⁴
- to a timely response
- to be informed in at least general terms about the actions taken and outcome of their complaint⁵
- to have decisions that affect them explained to them
- to at least one [1] review of the decision on the complaint⁶
- to be treated with courtesy and respect
- to communicate valid concerns and views without fear of reprisal or other unreasonable response.⁷

Staff have the right:

- to determine whether, and if so how, a complaint will be dealt with
- to finalise matters on the basis of outcomes they consider to be satisfactory in the circumstances⁸
- to expect honesty, cooperation, and reasonable assistance from complainants
- to expect honesty, cooperation and reasonable assistance from organisations and people within jurisdiction who are the subject of a complaint
- to be treated with courtesy and respect
- to a safe and healthy working environment⁹
- to modify, curtail or decline service (if appropriate) in response to unacceptable behaviour by a complainant.¹⁰

¹ The word 'rights' is not used here in the sense of legally enforceable rights (although some are), but in the sense of guarantees of certain standards of service and behaviour that a complaint handling system should be designed to provide to each of the parties to a complaint.

² Differences of opinion are normal: people perceive things differently, feel things differently and want different things. People have a right to their own opinions, provided those opinions are expressed in acceptable terms and in appropriate forums.

³ While degrees of independence will vary between complaint handlers, all should assess complaints fairly and as impartially as possible, based on a documented process and the merits of the case.

⁴ The 'right to be heard' refers to the opportunity to put a case to the complaint handler/decision-maker. This right can be modified, curtailed or lost due to unacceptable behaviour, and is subject to the complaint handler's right to determine how a complaint will be dealt with.

⁵ Provided this will not prejudice on-going or reasonably anticipated investigations or disciplinary/criminal proceedings.

⁶ Such a right of review can be provided internally to the organisation, for example by a person not connected to the original decision.

⁷ Provided the concerns are communicated in the ways set out in relevant legislation, policies and/or procedures established for the making of such complaints/allegations/disclosures/etc.

⁸ Some complaints cannot be resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, whether due to unreasonable expectations or the particular facts and circumstances of the complaint [see also footnote 25].

⁹ See for example WH&S laws and the common law duty of care on employers.

¹⁰ Unacceptable behaviour includes verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, threats, etc.



Subjects of a complaint have the right:

- to a fair and impartial assessment and, where appropriate, investigation of the allegations made against them
- to be treated with courtesy and respect by staff of Maitland City Council
- to be informed (at an appropriate time) about the substance of the allegations made against them that are being investigated¹¹
- to be informed about the substance of any proposed adverse comment or decision
- to be given a reasonable opportunity to put their case during the course of any investigation and before any final decision is made¹²
- to be told the outcome of any investigation into allegations about their conduct, including the reasons for any decision or recommendation that may be detrimental to them
- to be protected from harassment by disgruntled complainants acting unreasonably.

MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Complainants are responsible for:

- treating staff of Maitland City Council with dignity and respect
- clearly identifying to the best of their ability the issues of complaint, or asking for help from the staff of Maitland City Council to assist them in doing so
- providing Council, to the best of their ability, with all the relevant information available to them at the time of making the complaint
- being honest in all communications with Council
- informing Council of any other action they have taken in relation to their complaint¹³
- cooperating to the best of their ability with the staff who are assigned to assess/investigate/resolve/determine or otherwise deal with their complaint.

If complainants do not meet their responsibilities, Council may consider placing limitations or conditions on their ability to communicate with staff or access certain services.

Maitland City Council has a zero-tolerance policy in relation to any harm, abuse or threats directed towards its staff. Any conduct of this kind may result in a refusal to take any further action on a complaint or to have further dealings with the complainant.¹⁴ Any conduct of a criminal nature will be reported to police, and in certain cases legal action may also be considered.

Staff are responsible for:

- providing reasonable assistance, including cultural and linguistic assistance, to complainants who need help to make a complaint and, where appropriate, during the complaint process
- dealing with all complaints, complainants and people or organisations the subject of complaint professionally, fairly, and impartially
- giving complainants or their advocates a reasonable opportunity to explain their complaint, subject to the circumstances of the case and the conduct of the complainant
- giving people or organisations the subject of complaint a reasonable opportunity to put their case during the course of any investigation and before any final decision is made¹⁵

¹¹ Other than where there is an overriding public interest in curtailing the right, for example where to do so could reasonably create a serious risk to personal safety, to significant public funds, or to the integrity of an investigation into a serious issue. Any such notifications or opportunities should be given as required by law or may be timed so as not to prejudice that or any related investigation.

¹² Depending on the circumstances of the case and the seriousness of the possible outcomes for the person concerned, a reasonable opportunity to put their case, or to show cause, might involve a face to face discussion, a written submission, a hearing before the investigator or decision maker, or any combination of the above.

¹³ For example, whether they have made a similar complaint to another relevant person or body or have relevant legal proceedings on foot.

¹⁴ Other than in circumstances where the organisation is obliged to have an ongoing relationship with the complainant.

¹⁵ See footnote 11.

- informing people or organisations the subject of investigation, at an appropriate time, about the substance of the allegations made against them¹⁶ and the substance of any proposed adverse comment or decision that they may need to answer or address¹⁷
- keeping complainants informed of the actions taken and the outcome of their complaints¹⁸
- giving complainants explanations that are clear and appropriate to their circumstances, and adequately explaining the basis of any decisions that affect them
- treating complainants (and people who are the subject of complaints) with courtesy and respect at all times and in all circumstances
- taking all reasonable and practical steps to ensure that complainants¹⁹ are not subjected to any detrimental action in reprisal for making their complaint²⁰
- giving adequate warning of the consequences of unacceptable behaviour.

If Council or its staff fail to comply with these responsibilities, complainants may complain to the Office of Local Government olg@olg.nsw.gov.au or the NSW Ombudsman <https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/Making-a-complaint>.

Subjects of a complaint are responsible for:

- cooperating with the staff of Maitland City Council who are assigned to handle the complaint, particularly where they are exercising a lawful power in relation to a person or body within their jurisdiction^{20F}²¹
- providing all relevant information in their possession to Council or its authorised staff when required to do so by a properly authorised direction or notice
- being honest in all communications with Council and its staff
- treating the staff of Maitland City Council with courtesy and respect at all times and in all circumstances
- refraining from taking any detrimental action against the complainant²² in reprisal for them making the complaint.²³

If subjects of a complaint fail to comply with these responsibilities, action may be taken under relevant laws or codes of conduct.

Maitland City Council is responsible for:

- maintaining an appropriate and effective complaint handling system in place for receiving, assessing, handling, recording, and reviewing complaints
- making decisions about how all complaints will be dealt with
- ensuring that all complaints are dealt with professionally, fairly, and impartially²⁴
- ensuring that staff treat all parties to a complaint with courtesy and respect
- ensuring that the assessment and any inquiry into the investigation of a complaint is based on sound reasoning and logically probative information and evidence
- finalising complaints on the basis of outcomes that the organisation, or its responsible staff, consider to be satisfactory in the circumstances²⁵

¹⁶ Other than where an allegation is so lacking in merit that it can be dismissed at the outset.

¹⁷ See footnote 11.

¹⁸ See footnote 5.

¹⁹ 'Complainants' include whistleblowers/people who make internal disclosures.

²⁰ 'Complaints' includes disclosures made by whistleblowers/people who make internal disclosures.

²¹ This does not include any obligation to incriminate themselves in relation to criminal or disciplinary proceedings, unless otherwise provided by statute.

²² See footnote 19.

²³ See footnote 20.

²⁴ See footnote 3.

²⁵ Once made, complaints are effectively 'owned' by the complaint handler who is entitled to decide (subject to any statutory provisions that may apply) whether, and if so how, each complaint will be dealt with, who will be the case officer/investigator/decision-maker/etc, the resources and priority given to actioning the matter, the powers that will be exercised, the methodology used, the outcome of the matter, etc. Outcomes arising out of a complaint may be considered by the complaint handler to be satisfactory whether or not the complainants, any subjects of complaint or the organisation concerned agrees with or is satisfied with that outcome.



- implementing reasonable and appropriate policies, procedures, and practices to ensure that complainants²⁶ are not subjected to any detrimental action in reprisal for making a complaint²⁶²⁷, including maintaining separate complaint files and other operational files relating to the issues raised by individuals who make complaints
- adequately considering any confidentiality, secrecy or privacy obligations or responsibilities that may arise in the handling of complaints and the conduct of investigations.

If Council fails to comply with these responsibilities, complainants may complain to the Office of Local Government olg@olg.nsw.gov.au or the NSW Ombudsman <https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/Making-a-complaint>.

²⁶ See footnote 19.

²⁷ See footnote 20.

Appendix B

Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Incident Form

This form should only be filled out if you encounter unreasonable conduct by a complainant and consider that steps may need to be taken to change or restrict a complainant's access to services.

Complete this form and send it electronically or by hand to Councils' Public Officer within 24 hours of a UCC incident. They will decide on the necessary and appropriate course of action for responding to and managing the complainant's conduct.

Date: _____ Officer's name: _____

Name of complainant: _____

Details of the complainant's conduct/incident including whether emergency services were contacted:

Why do you consider this conduct to be unreasonable?

For example – has it occurred before/repeatedly, caused significant disruptions to Council, has or could raise significant health and safety issues for our staff or other persons.

What action, if any, have you taken to deal with/manage the complainant's conduct?

For example – warning the complainant 'verbally' about their conduct, previous attempts to manage the behaviour etc.

What do you think should be done to effectively manage the complainant's conduct?

Note – the final decision on the appropriate course of action will be made by Council's Public Officer.

Is there any other information that might be relevant to this case? Please include information on any personal or cultural background issues that may have affected the complainant's conduct. If necessary, attach any supporting documentation.

