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RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY REQUESTS

**A guide for elected
members and executive
managers**



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INTRODUCTION

INTERVENTION PROBLEMS

Local government is a unique entity. We wouldn't expect to call Spark or Telstra and speak directly to the Chief Executive or Chairperson about our phone connection, nor would either of those people think it reasonable to respond to our questions personally.

Yet, in a community setting, with people we know and problems we understand, the lines get blurred.

When the community reaches out, you want to help however you can.

So, well-meaning Councillors do precisely that, taking on the mantle of individual requests when they come in. In turn, polite executive managers indulge their interference.

Many of these issues are service requests and should be handled through the Council's established procedures. However, whether through a lack of knowledge, discontent with wait-times, or a desire for personalised service, people reach out directly to elected members.

Unfortunately, when there's a lack of clarity and good systems for managing community requests that come directly through Councillors, everybody suffers: staff, elected members, and ultimately, the community.



Rather than involving yourself in individual issues, it's important to get comfortable with how existing systems work, freeing up time for you to pull the big-picture levers that will make a real difference.

COMMUNITY IMPACTS

When the lines between operational and political blur, Councillors are hamstrung from doing what they've been elected to do.

Community confusion

Constituents may become confused as to who is responsible for addressing their concerns and may become frustrated when they receive inconsistent responses from different councillors.

Delayed outcomes

Ad-hoc issue management leads to disorganisation and overload in operational teams. This can lead to delays in addressing the concerns of constituents and can create an ineffective system of service delivery.

Compromised decisions

Councillors who intervene in operational issues may compromise established decision-making processes, which can result in inconsistent or inefficient decision-making.

Political polarisation

Different Councillors may have differing views on the best course of action for an issue – neither of which might be the correct process. This can lead to division and a lack of unity within the council.

Community confidence

When Councillors do not understand their role, they can undermine the public's trust in the council and its processes. This can lead to a loss of confidence in the council's ability to effectively serve its constituents.

ORGANISATIONAL IMPACTS

The impacts of operational intervention affect all of Council, and deliver negative community outcomes.

Duplicated effort

Some enquiries are double-handled when customers who are impatient or dissatisfied with the official response turn to Councillors.

Decreased efficiency

When established processes are disrupted and undermined, the resolution of more important issues is delayed.

Increased inequality

When certain constituents get preferential treatment, the fairness and integrity of Council services suffers.

Increased workloads

Demanding instant or urgent turnaround on individual issues creates pressure on operational staff who have a full workload.

Lost trust

Intervention shows mistrust in the expertise and judgement in operational staff – and undermines their trust in governance too.

Low morale

Operational staff are undermined and demoralised when they are bypassed by elected members, affecting morale and productivity.

Reduced accountability

Intervention creates confusion amongst staff and managers about who is responsible for a specific issue.

Notes

RESPONSE GUIDELINES

IN THIS SECTION

- Communication principles
- Request evaluation criteria
- Response flowchart



COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES

When you receive a message from a member of the community, how you respond is just as important as what you say!

Here are 6 guiding principles that will ensure you respond to all enquiries in a fair and friendly way.

1. Active listening

Take the time to listen to the constituents' request and understand their perspective.

Reflect back what you've heard.

2. Accuracy

Share the correct information about the processes and policies involved in addressing their request. If you don't know: ask.

3. Curiosity

Never assume. Stay open and curious, and ask clarifying questions to ensure you completely understand the situation.

4. Empathy

Directly acknowledge their distress or frustration. Let them know that you understand and are committed to finding a resolution.

5. Redirection

If the request is complex or beyond your jurisdiction, escalate it to the appropriate department or person. Let them know what to expect.

6. Responsiveness

Respond to requests in a timely manner. Set expectations for when they can expect to hear back from you, and follow through.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

How can you tell if this is an enquiry that needs escalation or intervention, or just an operational service request that needs to be lodged with the appropriate channels?

Here's a few criteria that will help.

1. Council jurisdiction

A community will never be short of problems and issues – but not all of them are Council's to solve! When we intervene in problems that we don't have the expertise or resources to manage, we can do more harm than good.

When receiving a request, the first step is to determine if the issue falls within Council's remit. If you aren't sure, check

2. Nature of request

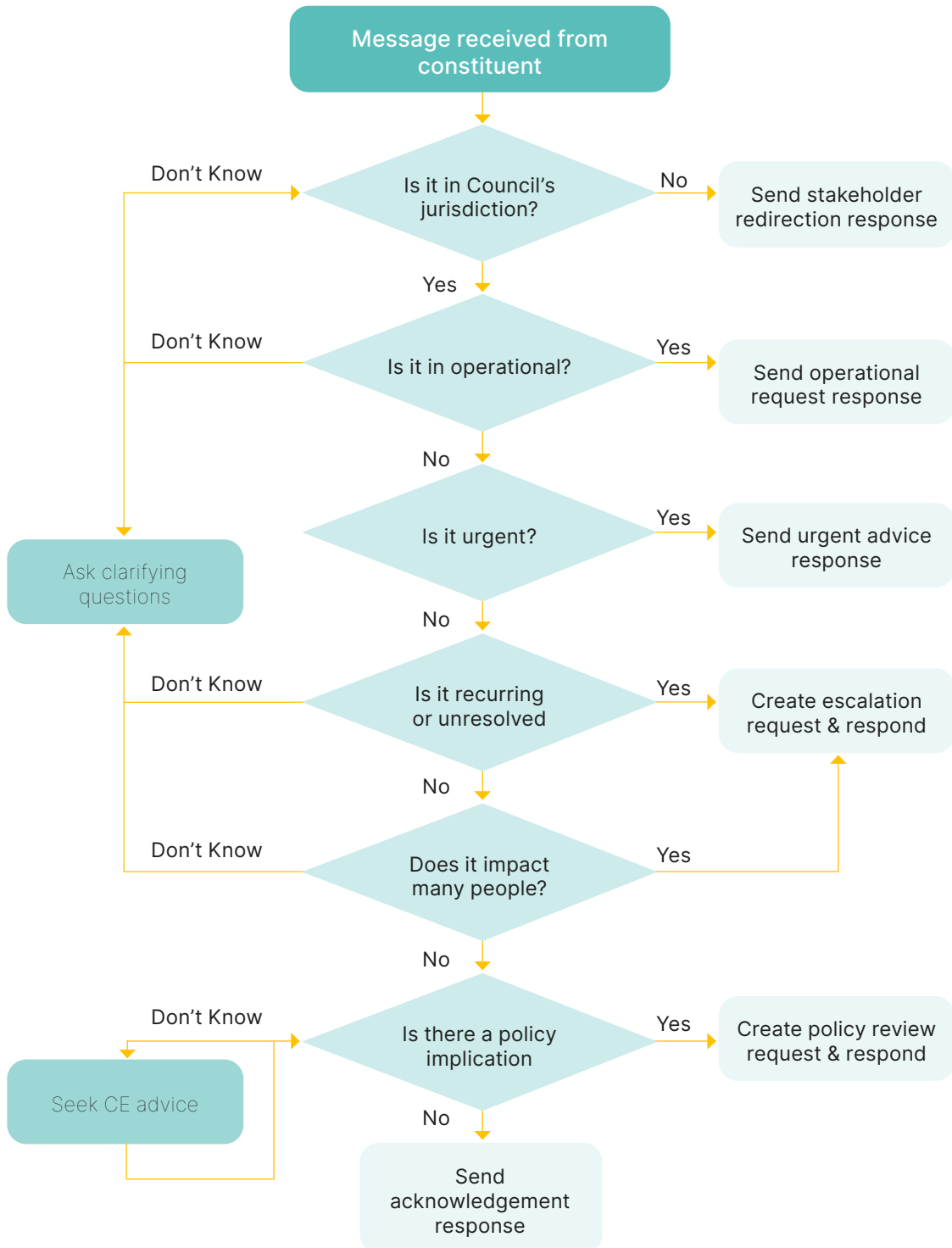
When assessing a request, consider if it should be managed by operational service teams or if it is within your role description to handle.

For example, issues related to road maintenance, waste management, or park maintenance should be handled by service teams, while policy issues and advocacy may fall in your remit.

3. Urgency and impact

Consider the time constraints involved. If the issue is particularly urgent, it may warrant direct intervention or escalation.

If the request impacts a large number of constituents or has the potential to impact a larger issue, consider your role in addressing it. This is the time to think about the rules, resources and relationships at your disposal.



RESPONSE TEMPLATES

IN THIS SECTION

- Stakeholder redirection
- Operational request
- Urgent advice
- Clarifying questions
- Policy review request
- Escalation request



STAKEHOLDER REDIRECTION

For many members of the community, 'Council' is one indistinct body. That means you will often receive requests that are best handled by Council's operational team.

In this instance, it's important to ensure they are lodged alongside other requests of this type, so they can be responded to quickly, fairly and efficiently by Council's service teams.

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I understand the importance and urgency of this matter, and I'm committed to helping you find a solution.

Issues of this type are the responsibility of [government department/agency/ service provider].

Please see their contact details below:

[web address]

[phone number]

[street address]

[email address]

When you submit your request, make sure to let them know [hint or important detail]

I wish you all the best in resolving this matter. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to help you in this instance – I will always do whatever I can to help.

Sincerely,

[Councillor]

OPERATIONAL REQUEST

It can be confusing to navigate government and third-sector agencies. When community members reach out about an issue that is not within Council's remit, it's important to connect them to the correct agency, department or service to help them with their query.

If you're unsure, check in with your Chief Executive. Together, you can build a handy directory that you keep updated for directing common questions to the right place.

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I understand the importance and urgency of this matter, and I'm committed to helping you find a solution.

To ensure the quickest and most efficient resolution, the best option is to submit a service request to [council website/service request portal/operational department contact].

This will allow Council's operational teams to assess the issue and provide a timely and appropriate response.

As an elected member, I am here to represent your interests and provide a voice for our community. However, it is important that operational issues are addressed through the appropriate channels to maintain fairness and efficiency for everyone.

I appreciate your understanding and look forward to hearing about the resolution of this matter

Sincerely,

[Councillor]

URGENT ADVICE

Some requests may be particularly urgent – due to health and safety, or other dangers to the individual or community.

When faced with this situation, it may be appropriate to redirect the request to Council's service team directly, as well as encouraging the constituent to lodge their own service request.

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I understand the importance of this matter, and I'm committed to helping you find a solution.

Given the urgency of this request, I have lodged a service request with [council website/service request portal/operational department contact] directly, and notified Customer Services of the urgency with a separate email. If the situation worsens, I encourage you to call Council's Customer Services team on the following number: [phone number]

For future requests of this type, your best bet is to submit a service request to [council website/service request portal/operational department contact] directly. This ensures the quickest and most efficient resolution.

As an elected member, I am here to represent your interests and provide a voice for our community. However, it is important that operational issues are addressed through the appropriate channels to maintain fairness and efficiency for everyone.

I appreciate your understanding and look forward to hearing about the resolution of this matter

Sincerely,

[Councillor]

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

You may not receive enough information, in the first instance, to respond appropriately. In this case, make sure to ask some follow-up questions.

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I'd like to know more, if you're comfortable sharing with me.

I've included a few questions below to help me understand the best way to help.

[Question Suggestions – select the most appropriate]

- Can you describe the issue in more detail? In particular, I'd like to know [query]
- How long has this been a problem for you?
- What other avenues have you tried to resolve this? What was the result?
- Who are the individuals or groups impacted by this issue? How is this issue affecting them?
- Have you raised this issue with Council or any other departments or agencies previously? If so, what was the outcome?
- Do you have any supporting documents or evidence that would help me understand the situation better?
- What would you like to see as an outcome or resolution?
- Are there any specific timelines or deadlines related to this issue?

By providing me with this additional information, I will be better equipped to help resolve your issue.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

Councillor

ESCALATION REQUEST

In some cases, issues that appear operational on the surface will require escalation and more senior attention. In this case, alert your Chief Executive and keep your constituent up to date.

Dear [Chief Executive],

Please see the below correspondence from [Constituent] regarding [issue]. I believe that this concern should be escalated for a prompt response from Council, due to:

[Escalation Criteria – select the most appropriate]

- The scale of this problem in the community
- The potential for large numbers of our community to be affected
- The significance of the potential consequences.

Please direct this to the appropriate manager or Council team member and keep me apprised of progress.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I understand the importance of this matter, and I'm committed to helping you find a solution.

Given the [escalation criteria] I have raised this issue with Council's senior leadership team for their consideration. I am confident they will give this the attention it requires.

I will be keeping tabs on this matter until we reach a resolution – please be patient as we investigate what the best course of action is.

Let me know if you have any further questions or concerns.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

POLICY REVIEW REQUEST

In some cases, issues that appear operational on the surface will require escalation and more senior attention. In this case, alert your Chief Executive and keep your constituent up to date.

Dear [Chief Executive],

Please see the below correspondence from [Constituent] regarding [issue]. I believe that this concern has implications for Council's policy on [policy type].

I would like to request further information and recommendations about how we might address this issue. Please advise what our options are to investigate this matter further, and the timeline in which we will be able to progress this.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I understand the importance of this matter, and I'm committed to helping you find a solution.

Given the potential implications for Council policy, I have raised this at a senior management level. While matters concerning policy change can be complex and take time to consider fully, please be assured that I will be staying across this issue as it progresses.

Please be patient as we investigate what the best course of action is here, and let me know if you have any further questions or concerns.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

Councillor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many of the messages you receive will not require specific action – rather, they are an important part of your connection to and engagement with the views and concerns of your community. In this instance, it's important to acknowledge and validate your constituents, even if no action will be taken at this time.

Dear [Constituent],

Thank you for reaching out to me regarding [issue]. I value your input and appreciate your proactiveness in raising this with me

I assure you that you have been heard and I have taken your concerns on board.

As an elected member, I am here to represent your interests, engage with your concerns and provide a voice for our community. I will keep your perspective and experiences front of mind when we discuss [relevant issue/s] at Council.

Thank you again for reaching out – these conversations are a useful and valuable way for Council to stay connected and relevant for our community. If you have any further questions or would like to discuss this further, I'm always open to a discussion.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

Councillor

CONCLUSION

FINAL COMMENTS

Role clarity only works when everyone operates within their boundaries.

Otherwise, we get trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of mistrust and boundary-stepping that serves no-one.

In order for Councillors to trust that service requests are being handled appropriately and the organisation is being run in an effective manner, they need reassurance in:

The quality of the systems being used by Council

The integrity and transparency of data being tracked and provided, proactively, to Councillors

The effectiveness of the communication channels and guidelines in place for both parties.

This requires a level of trust and respect that, if we try and do without, will make our lives harder than they need to be.

Community members don't know the right place to take their concerns – until they had a problem, they'd probably not thought much about Council.

A landing page on Council's website is a great place to direct constituents to how they can get the fastest and most satisfactory resolution to their issue, by outlining where to go with different questions or request types.

Other key changes to consider include:

- A formal escalation committee for tricky unresolved requests, comprised of Councillors and managers
- Informative, high-level reporting of trends, changes and concerns in operational service issues
- Transparent, real-time dashboards to track service response performance
- Improvements to Councillor inductions and development pathways
- Mentoring arrangements between longer-serving and new elected members.

Whatever you do, this is a work in progress. We won't solve these issues over night, but they can be solved – and when they are, the whole community wins.

Keep going.

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