

**ITEM NO. 8****FILE NO: 16/316869  
RM8 REF NO: PSC2010-00008****POLICY REVIEW: COMPLAINT HANDLING POLICY****REPORT OF: TONY WICKHAM - GOVERNANCE MANAGER  
GROUP: GENERAL MANAGER'S OFFICE****RECOMMENDATION IS THAT COUNCIL:**

- 1) Endorse the revised Complaint Handling policy shown at **(ATTACHMENT 1)**.
- 2) Place the Complaint Handling policy, as amended on public exhibition for a period of 28 days and should no submissions be received, the policy be adopted as amended, without a further report to Council.
- 3) Revoke the Complaints Handling policy dated 9 April 2013, Minute No. 088 **(ATTACHMENT 2)**, should no submissions be received.

**ORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING - 10 MAY 2016  
MOTION**

<b>116</b>	<b>Councillor Sally Dover Councillor John Nell</b>  It was resolved that Council:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Endorse the revised Complaint Handling policy shown at <b>(ATTACHMENT 1)</b>.</li><li>2) Place the Complaint Handling policy, as amended on public exhibition for a period of 28 days and should no submissions be received, the policy be adopted as amended, without a further report to Council.</li><li>3) Revoke the Complaints Handling policy dated 9 April 2013, Minute No. 088 <b>(ATTACHMENT 2)</b>, should no submissions be received.</li></ol>
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**BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with the reviewed Complaint Handling policy (policy). The policy has been reviewed as part of Council's ongoing policy review program.

The policy is based on the model complaint handling policy developed by the NSW Ombudsman and Council's policy has been updated to reflect the new model policy. It provides a framework for complaint management across Council and introduces an

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opportunity for continuous improvement with Council's service delivery to the community.

The policy details roles and responsibilities of all parties to a complaint and the expected behaviours.

The policy is presented for Council's consideration.

### COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

Strategic Direction	Delivery Program 2013-2017
Port Stephens has strong governance and civic leadership.	Manage the civic leadership and governance functions of Council. Manage relationships with all levels of government, stakeholder organisations and Hunter Councils Inc.

### FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Source of Funds	Yes/No	Funding (\$)	Comment
Existing budget	Yes		
Reserve Funds	No		
Section 94	No		
External Grants	No		
Other	No		

### LEGAL, POLICY AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

As part of good governance this policy will assist Council in managing complaints with the view to improving service delivery.

Risk	<u>Risk Ranking</u>	Proposed Treatments	Within Existing Resources?
There is a risk that without the appropriate complaints management framework in place, Council would not be compliant.	Low	Adopt the recommendation	Yes

## **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

Includes Social, Economic and Environmental Implications

Through openness, transparency and accountability, Council will be able to reduce the impact of complaints on Council resources and focus on provision of Council services.

Management of complaints can require a high level of Council resources. By reducing the number of complaints and by following the structured complaints system, Council will be able to focus resources into delivery of Council services.

## **MERGER PROPOSAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no implications associated with the recommendation.

## **CONSULTATION**

Consultation with key stakeholders has been undertaken by the General Manager's Office Section.

The *Local Government Act 1993* requires Council to conduct public consultation on policies prior to final adoption.

### Internal

- The Executive Team have been consulted to seek management endorsement.
- The General Manager has been consulted to seek endorsement prior to Council consideration.

### External

- NSW Ombudsman.
- Following Council adoption, the policy will be place on public exhibition in the Port Stephens Examiner and on Council's website.

In accordance with local government legislation the draft Complaint Handling policy will go on public exhibition from 26 May 2016 to 23 June 2016 for 28 days.

## **OPTIONS**

- 1) Accept the recommendations.
- 2) Amend the recommendations.
- 3) Reject the recommendations.

**ATTACHMENTS**

- 1) Revised Complaint Handling policy
- 2) Current Complaints Handling policy

**COUNCILLORS ROOM**

Nil.

**TABLED DOCUMENTS**

Nil.



## Policy



**FILE NO:** PSC2010-00008

**TITLE:** COMPLAINT HANDLING POLICY

**POLICY OWNER:** GOVERNANCE MANAGER

### **PURPOSE:**

This policy is intended to ensure that we handle complaints fairly, efficiently and effectively. Port Stephens Council's complaint management system is intended to:

- enable us to respond to issues raised by people making complaints in a timely and cost-effective way
- boost public confidence in our administrative process, and
- provide information that can be used by us to deliver quality improvements in our services, staff and complaint handling.

This policy provides guidance to our staff and people who wish to make a complaint on the key principles and concepts of our complaint management system.

### **CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

Council has had a Complaint Handling policy for many years which have been in alignment with the NSW Ombudsman's model complaint handling policy.

The model policy has been updated following a review of the Australia/New Zealand Standard: Guidelines for complaint management in organisations (AS/NZ 10002:2014).

The policy provides an open and transparent process for the management of complaints at Council.

Council views a complaint as an opportunity to improve on service delivery when all circumstances have been considered.

### **SCOPE:**

Port Stephens Council expects staff at all levels to be committed to fair, effective and efficient complaint handling. The following table outlines the nature of the commitment expected from staff and the way that commitment should be implemented.

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Who	Commitment	How
General Manager	Promote a culture that values complaints and their effective resolution	<p>Report publicly on Port Stephens Council's complaint handling.</p> <p>Provide adequate support and direction to key staff responsible for handling complaints.</p> <p>Regularly review reports about complaint trends and issues arising from complaints.</p> <p>Encourage all staff to be alert to complaints and assist those responsible for handling complaints resolve them promptly.</p> <p>Encourage staff to make recommendations for system improvements.</p> <p>Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.</p> <p>Support recommendations for service, staff and complaint handling improvements arising from the analysis of complaint data.</p> <p>Views a complaint as an opportunity for improved service delivery.</p>
Manager responsible for complaint handling	Establish and manage our complaint management system.	<p>Provide regular reports to the General Manager on issues arising from complaint handling work.</p> <p>Ensure recommendations arising out of complaint data analysis are canvassed with the General Manager and implemented where appropriate.</p> <p>Recruit, train and empower staff to resolve complaints promptly and in accordance with Port Stephens Council's policies and procedures.</p> <p>Encourage staff managing complaints to provide suggestions on ways to improve the organisation's complaint management system.</p> <p>Encourage all staff to be alert to complaints and assist those responsible for handling complaints resolve them promptly.</p> <p>Recognise and reward good complaint handling by staff.</p>

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Staff whose duties include complaint handling	Demonstrate exemplary complaint handling practices	<p>Treat all people with respect, including people who make complaints.</p> <p>Assist people make a complaint, if needed.</p> <p>Comply with this policy and its associated procedures.</p> <p>Keep informed about best practice in complaint handling.</p> <p>Provide feedback to management on issues arising from complaints.</p> <p>Provide suggestions to management on ways to improve the organisation's complaints management system.</p> <p>Implement changes arising from individual complaints and from the analysis of complaint data as directed by management.</p>
All staff	Understand and comply with Port Stephens Council's complaint handling practices.	<p>Treat all people with respect, including people who make complaints.</p> <p>Be aware of Port Stephens Council's complaint handling policies and procedures.</p> <p>Assist people who wish to make complaints access the Port Stephens Council's complaints process.</p> <p>Be alert to complaints and assist staff handling complaints resolve matters promptly.</p> <p>Provide feedback to management on issues arising from complaints.</p> <p>Implement changes arising from individual complaints and from the analysis and evaluation of complaint data as directed by management.</p>

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## Policy



### Guiding principles



### 1.0 Facilitate complaints

#### People focus

Port Stephens Council is committed to seeking and receiving feedback and complaints about our services, systems, practices, procedures, products and complaint handling. Such complaints provide Council with an opportunity for improved service delivery.

Any concerns raised in feedback or complaints will be dealt with within a reasonable time frame, in accordance with Council's Customer Service Charter.

People making complaints will be:

provided with information about our complaint handling process

provided with multiples and accessible ways to make complaints; such as in person, by letter, email or through assistance by other parties including staff.

listened to, treated with respect by staff and actively involved in the complaint process where possible and appropriate, and

provided with reasons for our decision/s and any options for redress or review.

#### No detriment to people making complaints

Port Stephens Council 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.

#### Anonymous complaints

Port Stephens Council accepts anonymous complaints and will carry out an investigation of the issues raised where there is enough information provided. It should be acknowledged that by making an anonymous complaint it may not be obvious to you what action Council has taken.

#### Accessibility

Port Stephens Council will ensure that information about how and where complaints may be

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made to or about us is well publicised. Council will ensure that our systems to manage complaints are easily understood and accessible to everyone, particularly people who may require assistance.

If a person prefers or needs another person or organisation to assist or represent them in the making and/or resolution of their complaint, we will communicate with them through their representative if this is their wish. Anyone may represent a person wishing to make a complaint with their consent (e.g. advocate, family member, legal or community representative, member of Parliament, another organisation).

### **No charge**

Complaining to Port Stephens Council is free.

## **2.0 Respond to complaints**

### **Early resolution**

Where possible, complaints will be resolved at first contact with Port Stephens Council.

### **Responsiveness**

Council will promptly acknowledge receipt of complaints.

Council will assess and prioritise complaints in accordance with the urgency and/or seriousness of the issues raised. If a matter concerns an immediate risk to safety or security the response will be immediate and will be escalated appropriately.

Port Stephens Council are committed to managing people's expectations, and will inform them as soon as possible, of the following:

- the complaints process
- the expected time frames for our actions
- the progress of the complaint and reasons for any delay
- their likely involvement in the process, and
- the possible or likely outcome of their complaint.

Council will advise people as soon as possible when we are unable to deal with any part of their complaint and provide advice about where such issues and/or complaints may be directed (if known and appropriate).

Council will also advise people as soon as possible when we are unable to meet our time frames for responding to their complaint and the reason for our delay.

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### **Objectivity and fairness**

Council will address each complaint with integrity and in an equitable, objective and unbiased manner.

Council will ensure that the person handling a complaint is different from any staff member whose conduct or service is being complained about.

Conflicts of interests, whether actual or perceived, will be managed responsibly. In particular, internal reviews of how a complaint was managed will be conducted by a person other than the original decision maker.

### **Responding flexibly**

Council staff are empowered to resolve complaints promptly and with as little formality as possible, where appropriate. Council will adopt flexible approaches to service delivery and problem solving to enhance accessibility for people making complaints and/or their representatives.

Council will assess each complaint on its merits and involve people making complaints and/or their representative in the process as far as possible.

### **Confidentiality**

Council protect the identity of people making complaints where this is practical and appropriate.

Personal information that identifies individuals will only be disclosed or used by the Council as permitted under the relevant privacy laws, secrecy provisions and any relevant confidentiality obligations.

## **3.0 Manage the parties to a complaint**

### **Complaints involving multiple agencies**

Where a complaint involves multiple organisations, we will work with the other organisation/s where possible; to ensure that communication with the person making a complaint and/or their representative is clear and coordinated.

Subject to privacy and confidentiality considerations, communication and information sharing between the parties will also be organised to facilitate a timely response to the complaint.

Where a complaint involves multiple areas within our organisation, responsibility for communicating with the person making the complaint and/or their representative will also be coordinated.

Where our services are contracted out, Council expect contracted service providers to have an accessible and comprehensive complaint management system. Council take complaints not only about the actions of Council staff but also the actions of service providers.

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### **Complaints involving multiple parties**

When similar complaints are made by related parties we will try to arrange to communicate with a single representative of the group.

### **Empowerment of staff**

All staff managing complaints are empowered to implement our complaint management system as relevant to their role and responsibilities.

Staff are encouraged to provide feedback on the effectiveness and efficiency of all aspects of our complaint management system.

### **Managing unreasonable conduct by people making complaints**

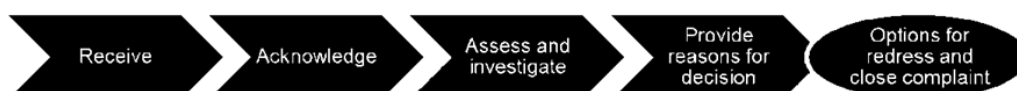
Council is committed to being accessible and responsive to all people who approach us with feedback or complaints. At the same time our success depends on:

Council's ability to do our work and perform our functions in the most effective and efficient way possible the health, safety and security of our staff, and Council's ability to allocate our resources fairly across all the complaints we receive.

When people behave unreasonably in their dealings with Council, their conduct can significantly affect the progress and efficiency of Council work. As a result, we will take proactive and decisive action to manage any conduct that negatively and unreasonably affects Council and will support Council staff to do the same in accordance with this policy.

For further information on managing unreasonable conduct by people making complaints, please refer to Council's Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy.

### **Complaint management system**



### **Introduction**

When responding to complaints, staff should act in accordance with our complaint handling procedures as well as any other internal documents providing guidance on the management of complaints.

Staff should also consider any relevant legislation and/or regulations when responding to complaints and feedback.

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The five key stages in our complaint management system are set out below.

### **Receipt of complaints**

Unless the complaint has been resolved at the outset, Council will record the complaint and its supporting information. Council will also assign a unique identifier to the complaint file.

The record of the complaint will document:

- the contact information of the person making a complaint
- issues raised by the person making a complaint and the outcome/s they want
- any other relevant and
- any additional support the person making a complaint requires.

### **Acknowledgement of complaints**

Council will acknowledge receipt of each complaint promptly, and preferably within seven (7) working days.

Consideration will be given to the most appropriate medium (e.g. email, letter) for communicating with the person making a complaint.

### **Initial assessment and addressing of complaints**

#### **Initial assessment**

After acknowledging receipt of the complaint, Council will confirm whether the issue/s raised in the complaint is/are within Council's control. Council will also consider the outcome/s sought by the person making a complaint and, where there is more than one issue raised, determine whether each issue needs to be separately addressed.

When determining how a complaint will be managed, Council will consider:

- How serious, complicated or urgent the complaint is
- Whether the complaint raises concerns about people's health and safety
- How the person making the complaint is being affected
- The risks involved if resolution of the complaint is delayed, and
- Whether a resolution requires the involvement of other organisations.

#### **Addressing complaints**

After assessing the complaint, we will consider how to manage it. To manage a complaint we may:

- Give the person making a complaint information or an explanation
- Gather information from the product, person or area that the complaint is about, or investigate the claims made in the complaint.

Council will keep the person making the complaint up to date on our progress, particularly if there are any delays. We will also communicate the outcome of the complaint using the most

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appropriate medium. Which actions we decide to take will be tailored to each case and take into account any statutory requirements.

### **Providing reasons for decisions**

Following consideration of the complaint and any investigation into the issues raised, Council will contact the person making the complaint and advise them:

- the outcome of the complaint and any action we took
- the reason/s for our decision
- the remedy or resolution/s that we have proposed or put in place, and
- any options for review that may be available to the complainant, such as an internal review, external review or appeal.

If in the course of investigation, Council make any adverse findings about a particular individual, we will consider any applicable privacy obligations under the *Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998* and any applicable exemptions in or made pursuant to that Act, before sharing our findings with the person making the complaint.

### **Closing the complaint, record keeping, redress and review**

Council will keep comprehensive records about:

- How we managed the complaint
- The outcome/s of the complaint (including whether it or any aspect of it was substantiated, any recommendations made to address problems identified and any decisions made on those recommendations, and
- Any outstanding actions that need to be followed up.

Council will ensure that outcomes are properly implemented, monitored and reported to the complaint handling manager and/or senior management.

### **Alternative avenues for dealing with complaints**

Council will inform people who make complaints to or about us about any internal or external review options available to them (including, but not limited, to the NSW Ombudsman and/or the NSW Office of Local Government).

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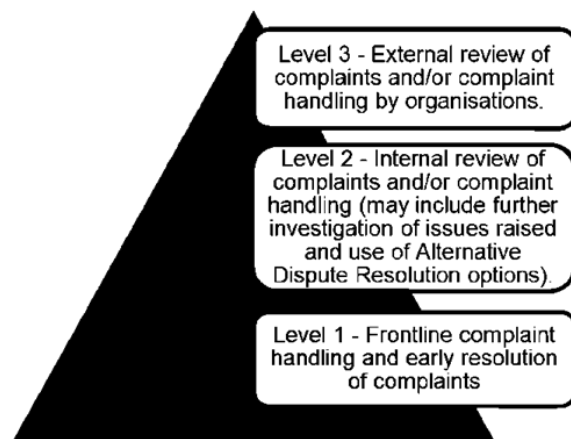
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### The three levels of complaint handling



Council aims to resolve complaints at the first level, the frontline. Wherever possible staff will be adequately equipped to respond to complaints, including being given appropriate authority, training and supervision.

Where this is not possible, Council may decide to escalate the complaint to a more senior officer within Council. This second level of complaint handling will provide for the following internal mechanisms:

- assessment and possible investigation of the complaint and decision/s already made, and/or
- facilitated resolution (where a person not connected with the complaint reviews the matter and attempts to find an outcome acceptable to the relevant parties).

Where a person making a complaint is dissatisfied with the outcome of Council's review of their complaint, they may seek an external review of our decision by the NSW Ombudsman.

### Accountability and learning

#### Analysis and evaluation of complaints

Council will ensure that complaints are recorded in a systematic way so that information can be easily retrieved for reporting and analysis. Council currently uses two system; HP Records Manager (RM8) and Customer Request Management system (CRM).

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Regular reports will be run on:

- the number of complaints received
- the outcome of complaints, including matters resolved at the frontline
- issues arising from complaints
- systemic issues identified, and
- the number of requests we receive for internal and/or external review of our complaint handling.

Regular analysis of these reports will be undertaken to monitor trends, measure the quality of our customer service and make improvements.

Both reports and their analysis will be provided to the General Manager and senior management for review.

### **Monitoring of the complaint management system**

Council will continually monitor our complaint management system to:

- ensure its effectiveness in responding to and resolving complaints, and
- identify and correct deficiencies in the operation of the system.
- monitoring may include the use of audits, complaint satisfaction surveys and online listening tools and alerts.

### **Continuous improvement**

Council are committed to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of our complaint management system. To this end, we will:

- support the making and appropriate resolution of complaints
- implement best practices in complaint handling
- recognise and reward exemplary complaint handling by staff
- regularly review the complaints management system and complaint data, and
- implement appropriate system changes arising out of our analysis of complaints data and continual monitoring of the system.

### **DEFINITIONS:**

An outline of the key definitions of terms included in the policy.

**Complaint** Expression of dissatisfaction made to or about us, our services, staff or the handling of a complaint where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

A complaint covered by this Policy can be distinguished from:

- staff grievances [see our grievance procedure]
- public interest disclosures made by our staff [see our internal reporting policy]

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- code of conduct complaints [see our code of conduct]
- responses to requests for feedback about the standard of our service provision [see the definition of 'feedback' below]
- reports of problems or wrongdoing merely intended to bring a problem to our notice with no expectation of a response [see definition of 'feedback']
- service requests [see definition of 'service request' below], and
- requests for information [see our access to information policy].

Complaint management system	All policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used by Council the management of complaints.
Dispute	An unresolved complaint escalated either within or outside of our organisation.
Feedback	Opinions, comments and expressions of interest or concern, made directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, to or about us, about our services or complaint handling where a response is not explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.
Grievance	A clear, formal written statement by an individual staff member about another staff member or a work related problem.
Policy	A statement or instruction that sets out how we should fulfil our vision, mission and goals.
Procedure/process	A statement or instruction that sets out how our policies will be implemented and by whom.
Public interest disclosure	A report about wrong doing made by a public official in New South Wales that meets the requirements of the <i>Public Interest Disclosures Act 1994</i> .
Service request	Service request includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• requests for approval</li> <li>• requests for action</li> <li>• routine inquiries about the organisation's business</li> <li>• requests for the provision of services and assistance</li> <li>• reports of failure to comply with laws regulated by the organisation</li> <li>• requests for explanation of policies, procedures and decisions.</li> </ul>

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### POLICY STATEMENT:

This policy applies to all staff receiving or managing complaints from the public made to or about us, regarding our services, staff and complaint handling.

Staff grievances, code of conduct complaints and public interest disclosures are dealt with through separate mechanisms.

### POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES:

- 1) General Manager, Group Managers and Section Managers are responsible for implementing and complying with this policy.
- 2) Governance Manager is responsible for implementing, complying with, monitoring, evaluating, reviewing and providing advice on the policy.

### RELATED DOCUMENTS:

- 1) *Local Government Act 1993*
- 2) *Public Interest Disclosure Act 1994*
- 3) *Ombudsman Act 1974*
- 4) *Independent Commission Against Corruption 1988*
- 5) *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*
- 6) Code of Conduct
- 7) NSW Ombudsman - Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual

### CONTROLLED DOCUMENT INFORMATION:

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<b>RM8 container No</b>	PSC2010-00008	<b>RM8 record No</b>	
<b>Audience</b>	Port Stephens community and Council employees		
<b>Process owner</b>	Governance Manager		
<b>Author</b>	Governance Manager		
<b>Review timeframe</b>	Two years	<b>Next review date</b>	February 2018

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## Policy



Adoption date

## VERSION HISTORY:

Version	Date	Author	Details	Minute No.
1.0	16/02/1999	Assistant General Manager	Adopted by Council	069
2.0	14/12/2010	Executive Officer	Adopted by Council	410
3.0	09/04/2013	Executive Officer	Adopted by Council	088
4.0		Governance Manager	A major re-drafting in line with the model complaint handling policy of the NSW Ombudsman. Transferred into the new policy template and corporate branding.	

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# *Port Stephens*

## C·O·U·N·C·I·L

### **POLICY**

Adopted: 14/12/2010  
Minute No: 410  
Amended: 9 April 2013  
Minute No: 088

**FILE NO:      PSC2010-00008**

**TITLE:          COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY**

**REPORT OF   EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Council adopted its previous Complaint/Request Handling policy in 1999 following the development of a number of NSW Ombudsman's guidelines and policies.

It is acknowledged that there is a difference between a complaint and a request for service. This policy specifically deals with complaints that are received concerning matters that are under Council's control and management.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

The objective of the Policy is to provide the community with a structured process to follow when lodging a complaint with Council. This will allow openness, transparency and accountability of both Council and for all parties involved.

#### **PRINCIPLES**

1. Council is committed to resolving complaints to achieve the best outcome for all parties concerned.
2. Council will respond to all complaints lodged under the policy and provide a written response.
3. All parties involved in a complaint handling matter are required to interact in an appropriate manner.

#### **POLICY STATEMENT**

This policy has been developed in line with the NSW Ombudsman Guidelines – *‘Effective Complaint Handling 2004’* and *‘Managing Unreasonable*

**ITEM 8 - ATTACHMENT 2      CURRENT COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY**

*Complainant Conduct Practice Manual 2009". Council will manage all unreasonable complainant conduct in accordance with the NSW Ombudsman Guidelines.*

The Policy strives to provide a structured and timely manner in dealing with complaints.

A complaint is defined as *"An expression of dissatisfaction with Council's policies, procedures, fees and charges, Council officials, quality of service or goods provided".*

Those matters exempt from this policy are:-

- 1) Staff personnel matters – refer to Council's Grievance procedure
- 2) Public Interest Disclosure declaration – refer to the Code of Conduct
- 3) Allegations of corruption – refer to the Code of Conduct
- 4) Complaints concerning National Competition Policy – refer to Competitive Neutrality Complaints Policy.
- 5) Request for a Council service – refer to Council's Customer request service.

The complaints handling framework is developed on a 3 Tier approach.

**Tier 1** – Staff empowered with clear delegations to resolved complaints wherever possible at first contact. Staff log complaint details for later analysis of data.

**Tier 2** – More senior staff or designated person reviews/investigates unresolved complaints.

**Tier 3** – Still unresolved complaints referred externally.



**Tier 1 – Front line complaints handling**

1. All staff will receive complaints in **person**, writing, by telephone, email or fax. They will listen courteously, record all the facts and initiate appropriate action.
2. Written complaints will be acknowledged in accordance with Council's Customer Service Charter.
3. All verbal complaints will be recorded in Council's Customer Request System and/or within the Electronic Records System (TRIM).
4. If a complainant's conduct becomes unreasonable or inappropriate, staff will inform the person that their conduct is unreasonable and must cease. The complainant may put their concerns in writing. If necessary staff will call their supervisor who may decide to request the person to leave the premises or call the police to escort the person from the premises.
5. All requests for information regarding complaints are to be assessed under Council's Assessing Information Policy and the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009.
6. Anonymous complaints will be recorded and refer to Tier 2 to determine if action is required. Tier 2 staff will consider the nature of the complaint and if it is an offence and where there is sufficient information to warrant investigation. If no action is taken then reasons for the decision will be recorded.
7. Complainants wishing to speak to the Mayor or General Manager at Tier 1 will be referred to the relevant officer to deal with the enquiry.

**Tier 2 – Internal Review or Investigation**

1. All complaints will be determined and/or investigated by the appropriate officer.
2. To ensure procedural fairness, the person will be informed of any allegation of wrong doing or adverse comment made about them where this is the basis of any action by Council. A copy of the complaint will be available in accordance with various legislation requirements.
3. The person will be able to provide an explanation of his or her actions.
4. Upon examination of all the facts appropriate action will be taken to resolve the matter. If no action is to be taken reasons will be given for the decision.
5. All parties will be advised of the outcome of any investigation.
6. All information forming part of the investigation will be released in accordance with the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009.
7. If a member of staff is unable to resolve the complaint or the conduct of a complainant becomes unreasonable, the matter will be referred to:-
  - The staff member's supervisor and/or Section or Group Manager;
  - Council's Public Officer or other officer as determined by the General Manager, to conduct an internal review on behalf of the General Manager.
8. When assessing a complaint the Public Officer or other officers will consider: the matter in accordance with the NSW Ombudsman's Guidelines.
9. If the internal review does not reveal any evidence to support the complaint the Public Officer or other officers may decide not to investigate the matter any further. Advice will be given to the complainant that Council will not pursue the matter further and that if they are not happy with the response they may refer the matter to an external body as identified in Tier 3.
10. Neighbourhood Disputes - In the case of neighbourhood disputes if the matter does not relate to Council's services or functions. Staff may advise the complainant of the Community Justice Centre mediation services. The CJC may then be informed of the dispute to arrange mediation where possible. Council will not be a party to complaints that fall outside its services or functions.

**Tier 3 – External Review**

1. Persons dissatisfied with Council's response may refer the matter to the NSW Ombudsman, Division of Local Government or the Independent Commission Against Corruption.
2. The services of the Community Justice Centre are available to mediate where all parties are agreeable and Council is unable to satisfy the complainant's request. Staff will inform a complainant of any appeal procedure available to resolve their grievance.

**RELATED POLICIES**

Code of Conduct

Assessing Information Policy

Competitive Neutrality Complaints Policy

Compliance Policy

Alternative Dispute Resolution Policy

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

**SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Through openness, transparency and accountability, Council will be able to reduce the impact of complaints on Council resources and focus on provision of Council services.

**ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**

Management of complaints can require a high level of Council resources. By reducing the number of complaints and by following the structured complaints system, Council will be able to focus resources into delivery of Council services.

**ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

Nil

**RELEVANT LEGISLATIVE PROVISIONS**

*Local Government Act 1993*

*Public Interest Disclosure Act 1994*

*Ombudsman Act 1974*

*Independent Commission Against Corruption 1988*

*Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*

**IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITY**

General Manager, Group Managers and Section Managers

**PROCESS OWNER**

Executive Officer

**REVIEW DATE**

Biennial

**ITEM NO. 9****FILE NO: 16/316900  
RM8 REF NO: PSC2010-00008****POLICY: MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT CONDUCT****REPORT OF: TONY WICKHAM - GOVERNANCE MANAGER  
GROUP: GENERAL MANAGER'S OFFICE****RECOMMENDATION IS THAT COUNCIL:**

- 1) Endorse the Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy shown at **(ATTACHMENT 1)**.
- 2) Place the Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy on public exhibition for a period of 28 days and should no submissions be received, the policy be adopted, without a further report to Council.

**ORDINARY COUNCIL MEETING - 10 MAY 2016  
MOTION**

<b>117</b>	<b>Councillor John Nell Councillor Chris Doohan</b>  It was resolved that Council:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Endorse the Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy shown at <b>(ATTACHMENT 1)</b>.</li><li>2) Place the Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy on public exhibition for a period of 28 days and should no submissions be received, the policy be adopted, without a further report to Council.</li></ol>
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**BACKGROUND**

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with the new Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy (policy). The policy has been introduced as part of Council's ongoing policy review program where it was identified that there is a need for this policy. This policy will support Council's Complaint Handling policy.

The policy is based on the model managing unreasonable complainant conduct policy developed by the NSW Ombudsman.

It provides a framework for managing unreasonable conduct by complainants. The policy details roles and responsibilities of all parties to a complaint, expected behaviours and how the process will be managing by Council.

## MINUTES ORDINARY COUNCIL - 10 MAY 2016

The policy is presented for Council's consideration.

### COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

Strategic Direction	Delivery Program 2013-2017
Port Stephens has strong governance and civic leadership.	Manage the civic leadership and governance functions of Council. Manage relationships with all levels of government, stakeholder organisations and Hunter Councils Inc.

### FINANCIAL/RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Source of Funds	Yes/No	Funding (\$)	Comment
Existing budget	Yes		
Reserve Funds	No		
Section 94	No		
External Grants	No		
Other	No		

### LEGAL, POLICY AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

This policy will support Council's complaint management framework and assist to reduce unnecessary diversion of Council resources in complaint management. Council strives to provide the best outcome for all parties within the relevant legislative framework.

Risk	<u>Risk Ranking</u>	Proposed Treatments	Within Existing Resources?
There is a risk that without such a policy Council could have situations where Council resources are unnecessarily utilised in resolving matters due to unreasonable conduct by complainants.	Low	Adopt the recommendation	Yes

### SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Includes Social, Economic and Environmental Implications

Nil.

## **MERGER PROPOSAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no implications associated with the recommendation.

## **CONSULTATION**

Consultation with key stakeholders has been undertaken by the General Manager's Office Section.

The *Local Government Act 1993* requires Council to conduct public consultation on policies prior to final adoption.

### Internal

- The Executive Team have been consulted to seek management endorsement.
- The General Manager has been consulted to seek endorsement prior to Council consideration.

### External

- Following Council adoption, the policy will be place on public exhibition in the Port Stephens Examiner and on Council's website.

In accordance with local government legislation the draft Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy will go on public exhibition from 26 May 2016 to 23 June 2016 for 28 days.

## **OPTIONS**

- 1) Accept the recommendations.
- 2) Amend the recommendations.
- 3) Reject the recommendations.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- 1) Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct policy

## **COUNCILLORS ROOM**

Nil.

## **TABLED DOCUMENTS**

Nil.

**ITEM 9 - ATTACHMENT 1      MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT CONDUCT POLICY**

**Policy**



**FILE NO:** PSC2010-00008

**TITLE:** MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT CONDUCT POLICY

**POLICY OWNER:** GOVERNANCE MANAGER

**PURPOSE:**

This policy is to assist all staff members to better manage unreasonable complainant conduct ('UCC').

Its aim is to ensure that all staff:

- Feel confident and supported in taking action to manage UCC.
- Act fairly, consistently, honestly and appropriately when responding to UCC.
- Are aware of 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 Complainant Conduct Practice Manual (2nd edition) ('practice manual') 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 members of our organisation.
  - Legal instruments such as trespass laws/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.
- Have a clear understanding of the criteria that will be considered before we decide to change or restrict a complainant's access to our services.
- Are aware of the processes that will be followed to record and report UCC incidents as well as the procedures for consulting and notifying complainants about any proposed actions or decisions to change or restrict their access to our services.
- Are familiar with the procedures for reviewing decisions made under this policy, including specific timeframes for review.

**CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:**

Council has developed this policy to support the Complaint Handling Policy.

This policy is based on the NSW Ombudsman's Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Model Policy.

The policy provides an open and transparent process for the management of UCC at Council.

**Policy**

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### SCOPE:

#### 1.0 Defining unreasonable complainant conduct

##### 1.1 Unreasonable complainant conduct

Most complainants who come to our organisation act reasonably and responsibly in their interactions with us, even when they are experiencing high levels of distress, frustration and anger about their complaint. However in a very small number of cases some complainants behave in ways that are inappropriate and unacceptable – despite our best efforts to help them. They are aggressive and verbally abusive towards our staff. They threaten harm and violence, bombard our organisation with unnecessary and excessive phone calls and emails, make inappropriate demands on our time and our resources and refuse to accept our decisions and recommendations in relation to their complaints. When complainants behave in these ways we consider their conduct to be 'unreasonable'.

Unreasonable complainant conduct ('UCC') 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 our organisation, our staff, other service users and complainants or the complainant himself/herself.

UCC can be divided into five categories of conduct:

- Unreasonable persistence
- Unreasonable demands
- Unreasonable lack of cooperation
- Unreasonable arguments
- Unreasonable behaviours

##### 1.2 Unreasonable persistence

Unreasonable persistence is continued, incessant and unrelenting conduct by a complainant that has a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on our organisation, staff, services, time and/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.
- 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 when it is not warranted and refusing to accept further action cannot or will not be taken on their complaints.
- Reframing a complaint in an effort to get it taken up again.
- Bombarding our staff/organisation with phone calls, visits, letters, and emails (including cc'd correspondence) after repeatedly being asked not to do so.
- Contacting different people within our organisation and/or externally to get a different

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outcome or more sympathetic response to their complaint – internal and external forum shopping.

### **1.3 Unreasonable demands**

Unreasonable demands are any demands (express or implied) that are made by a complainant that have a disproportionate and unreasonable impact on our organisation, staff, services, time and/or resources. Some examples of unreasonable demands include:

- Issuing instructions and making demands about how we have/should handle their complaint, the priority it was/should be given, or the outcome that was/should be achieved.
- Insisting on talking to a senior manager or the General Manager personally when it is not appropriate or warranted.
- Emotional blackmail and manipulation with the intention to guilt trip, intimidate, harass, shame, seduce or portray themselves as being victimised – when this is not the case.
- Insisting on outcomes that are not possible or appropriate in the circumstances – eg. for someone to be sacked or prosecuted, an apology and/or compensation when no reasonable basis for expecting this.
- Demanding services that are of a nature or scale that we cannot provide when this has been explained to them repeatedly.

### **1.4 Unreasonable lack of cooperation**

Unreasonable lack of cooperation is an unwillingness and/or inability by a complainant to cooperate with our organisation, staff, or complaints system and processes that results in a disproportionate and unreasonable use of our services, time and/or resources. Some examples of unreasonable lack of cooperation include:

- Sending a constant stream of comprehensive and/or disorganised information without clearly defining any issues of complaint or explaining how they relate to the core issues being complained about – only where the complainant is clearly capable of doing this.
- Providing little or no detail with a complaint or presenting information in 'drips and drabs'.
- Refusing to follow or accept our instructions, suggestions, or advice without a clear or justifiable reason for doing so.
- Arguing frequently and/or with extreme intensity that a particular solution is the correct one in the face of valid contrary arguments and explanations.
- Displaying unhelpful behaviour – such as withholding information, acting dishonestly, misquoting others, and so forth.

### **1.5 Unreasonable arguments**

Unreasonable arguments include 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 our organisation, staff, services, time, and/or resources. Arguments are unreasonable when they:

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- fail to follow a logical sequence
- are not supported by any evidence and/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.

### 1.6 Unreasonable behaviour

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

- Acts of aggression, verbal abuse, derogatory, racist, or grossly defamatory remarks
- Harassment, intimidation or physical violence.
- Rude, confronting and 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.

All staff should note that Port Stephens Council has a zero tolerance policy towards any harm, abuse or threats directed towards them. 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.

## 2.0 Roles and responsibilities

### 2.1 All staff

All staff are responsible for familiarising themselves with this policy as well as the Individual Rights and Mutual Responsibilities of the Parties to a Complaint in Appendix A. 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 for UCC.

Staff are also encouraged and authorised to use the strategies and scripts provided in Part 5 of the practice manual to manage UCC, in particular:

- Strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable persistence.
- Strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable demands.
- Strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable lack of cooperation.
- Strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable arguments.
- Strategies and script ideas for managing unreasonable behaviours.

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However, it must be emphasised that any strategies that effectively change or restrict a complainant's access to our services must be considered at the senior management level 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 Governance Manager within 24 hours of the incident occurring, using the UCC incident form. A file note of the incident should also be recorded in Council's records management system – HP Record Manager (RM8).

### **2.2 The Governance Manager**

The Governance Manager, 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 take into account the criteria in Part 5.2 below and will aim to impose any service changes/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 behaviour.

When applying this policy the Governance Manager 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 and safety and security of our staff and/or third parties.

The Governance Manager 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 also manage and keep a file record of all cases where this policy is applied.

### **2.3 Senior Managers**

All senior managers are responsible for supporting staff to apply the strategies in this policy, as well as those in the practice manual. Senior managers are also responsible for ensuring compliance with the procedures identified in this policy and ensuring that all staff members are trained to deal with UCC – including on induction.

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

Depending on the circumstances senior managers may also be responsible for arranging other forms of support for staff which are detailed in Part 10 of this policy.

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### **3.0 Responding to and managing unreasonable complainant conduct**

#### **3.1 Changing or restricting a complainant's access to our services**

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

- **Who they have contact with** – eg. limiting a complainant to a sole contact person/staff member in our organisation.
- **What they can raise with us** – eg. restricting the subject matter of communications that we will consider and respond to.
- **When they can have contact** – eg. limiting a complainant's contact with our organisation to a particular time, day, or length of time, or curbing the frequency of their contact with us.
- **Where they can make contact** – eg. limiting the locations where we will conduct face-to-face interviews to secured facilities or areas of the office.
- **How they can make contact** – eg. limiting or modifying the forms of contact that the complainant can have with our organisation. 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 our services altogether.

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

#### **3.2 Who – limiting the complainant to a sole contact point**

Where a complainant tries to forum shop internally within our organisation, changes their issues of complaint repeatedly, 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 exclusively manage their complaint(s) and interactions with our organisation. This may ensure they are dealt with consistently and may minimise the chances for misunderstandings, contradictions and manipulation.

To avoid staff 'burn out' the sole contact officer's supervisor will provide them with regular support and guidance – as needed. Also, the Governance Manager will review the arrangement every six months to ensure that the officer is managing/coping with the arrangement.

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 – eg. they go on leave or are otherwise unavailable for an extended period of time.

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### 3.3 What – restricting the subject matter of communications that we will consider

Where complainants repeatedly send written communications, letters, emails, or online forms that raise trivial or insignificant issues, contain inappropriate or abusive content or relate to a complaint/issue that has already been comprehensively considered and/or reviewed (at least once) by our office, we may restrict the issues/subject matter the complainant can raise with us/we will respond to. For example, our organisation may:

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

### 3.4 When – limiting when and how a complainant can contact our organisation

If a complainant's telephone, written or face-to-face contact with our organisation places an unreasonable demand on our time or resources because it is overly lengthy (eg. disorganised and voluminous correspondence) or affects the health, safety and security of our staff because it involves behaviour that is persistently rude, threatening, abusive or aggressive, we may limit when and/or how the complainant can interact with us. 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 [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 [15] 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 [45] minutes.
- Limiting the frequency of their telephone calls, written correspondence or face-to-face interviews. Depending on the nature of the service(s) provided we may limit:
  - Telephone calls to [1] every two weeks/ month.
  - Written communications to [1] every two weeks/month.
  - Face-to-face interviews to [1] every two weeks/month.

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

- Require the complainant to clearly identify how the information or supporting materials

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- they have sent to us 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 our organisation.
- Restrict a complainant to sending emails to a particular email account (eg. the organisation's main email account) or block their email access altogether and require that any further correspondence be sent through Australia Post only.

**Writing only restrictions**

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

- Australia Post only
- Email only to a specific staff email or our general office email account
- Fax only to a specific fax number
- Some other relevant form of written contact, where applicable.

If a complainant's contact is restricted to 'writing only', the Governance Manager will clearly identify the specific means that the complainant can use to contact our office (eg. Australia Post only). Also if it is not suitable for a complainant to enter our premises to hand deliver their written communication; this must be communicated to them as well.

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

**3.5 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 our premises, we may consider restricting our face-to-face contact with them.

These restrictions may include:

- Restricting access to particular secured premises or areas of our premises – such as the reception area or secured room/facility.
- Restricting their ability to attend our premises to specified times of the day and/or days of the week only – for example, when additional security is available or to times/days that are less busy.
- Allowing them to attend our office on an 'appointment only' basis and only with specified staff. Note – during these meetings staff should always seek support and assistance of a colleague for added safety and security.
- Banning the complainant from attending our premises altogether and allowing some other form of contact – eg. 'writing only' or 'telephone only' contact.

**Contact through a representative only**

In cases where our organisation cannot completely restrict our contact with a complainant and their conduct is particularly difficult to manage, we may also restrict their contact to contact through a support person or representative only. The support person may be nominated by the

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complainant but must be approved by the Governance Manager.

When assessing a representative/support person's suitability, the Governance Manager should consider factors like: the nominated representative/support person's competency and literacy skills, demeanour/behaviour and relationship with the complainant. If the Governance Manager determines that the representative/support person may exacerbate the situation with the complainant the complainant will be asked to nominate another person or our organisation may assist them in this regard.

### **3.6 Completely terminating a complainant's access to our services**

In rare cases, and as a last resort when all other strategies have been considered and/or attempted, the General Manager may decide that it is necessary for our organisation to completely restrict a complainant's contact/access to our 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 and/or their conduct poses a significant risk for our staff or other parties because it involves one or more of the following types of conduct:

- Acts of aggression, verbal and/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 – eg. entrapping them in their home.
- 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 Part 5.4 below.

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

## **4.0 Alternative dispute resolution**

### **4.1 Using alternative dispute resolution strategies to manage conflicts with complainants**

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

However, we recognise that in UCC situations, ADR may not be an appropriate or effective strategy particularly if the complainant is uncooperative or resistant to compromise. Therefore,

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each case will be assessed on its own facts to determine the appropriateness of this approach. Council has an existing Alternative Dispute Resolution policy in these circumstances.

### **5.0 Procedure to be followed when changing or restricting a complainant's access to our services**

#### **5.1 Consulting with relevant staff**

When the Governance Manager 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.
- The impact of the complainant's conduct on our organisation, relevant staff, our time, resources, etc.
- The complainant's responsiveness to the staff member's warnings/requests to stop the behaviour.
- The actions the staff member has taken to manage the complainant's conduct, if any.
- The 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 Governance Manager will search the case management system for information about the complainant's prior conduct and history with our organisation. 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 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/ conduct in the circumstances was moderately disproportionate, grossly disproportionate or not at all disproportionate.
- Whether there any statutory provisions that would limit the types of limitations that can be

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put on the complainant's contact/access to our services.

Once the Governance Manager has considered these factors 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 practice 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 Governance Manager will provide them with a written warning about their conduct in the first instance.

The warning letter will:

- Specify the date, time and location of the UCC incident.
- 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 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. See Appendix A.
- Provide the name and contact details of the staff member who they can contact about the letter.
- Be signed by the Governance 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 Governance Manager has the discretion to send a notification letter immediately restricting the complainant's access to our services (without prior written warning).

This notification letter will:

- Specify the date, time and location of the UCC incident(s).
- Explain why the complainant's conduct/UCC incident(s) 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, without a review of the circumstances.
- 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 General Manager.

### 5.5 Notifying relevant staff about access changes/restrictions

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The Governance Manager 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 Governance Manager will also update the case management system with a record outlining the nature of the restrictions imposed and their duration.

### **5.6 Continued monitoring/oversight responsibilities**

Once a complainant has been issued with a warning letter or notification letter the Governance Manager will review the complainant's record/restriction every 3 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 Governance Manager 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.

### **6.0 Appealing a decision to change or restrict access to our services**

#### **6.1 Right of appeal**

Complainants are entitled to one appeal of a decision to change/restrict their access to our services. This review will be undertaken by a senior staff member who was not involved in the original decision to change or restrict the complainant's access. This staff member will consider the complainant's arguments along with all relevant records regarding the complainant's past conduct. They will advise the complainant of the outcome of their appeal by letter which must be signed off by the General Manager. The staff member will then refer any materials/records relating to the appeal to the Governance Manager to be kept in the appropriate file.

If a complainant continues to be dissatisfied after the appeal process, they may seek an external review from an oversight agency such as the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman may accept the review (in accordance with its administrative jurisdiction) to ensure that we have acted fairly, reasonably and consistently and have observed the principles of good administrative practice including, procedural fairness.

### **7.0 Non-compliance with a change or restriction on access to our services**

#### **7.1 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 HP Records Manager (RM8) and a copy forwarded to the Governance Manager who will decide whether any action needs to be taken to modify or further restrict the complainant's access to our services.

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### **8.0 Periodic reviews of all cases where this policy is applied**

#### **8.1 Period for review**

All UCC cases where this policy is applied will be reviewed every 3 months or 6 months (depending on the nature of the service provided) and not more than 12 months after the service change or restriction was initially imposed or continued/upheld.

#### **8.2 Notifying the complainant of an upcoming review**

The Governance Manager will invite all complainants to participate in the review process unless they determine that this invitation will provoke a negative response from the complainant (ie. further UCC). The invitation will be given and the review will be conducted in accordance with the complainant's access restrictions (eg. if contact has been restricted to writing only then the invitation to participate will be done in writing).

#### **8.3 Criteria to be considered during a review**

When conducting a review the Governance Manager 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/arguments put forward by the complainant for review.
- Any other information that may be relevant in the circumstances.
- 

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

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

#### **8.4 Notifying a complainant of the outcome of a review**

The Governance Manager will notify the complainant of the outcome of their review using the appropriate/relevant method of communication as well as a written letter explaining the outcome, as applicable. The review letter will:

- Briefly explain the review process.
- Identify the factors that have been taken into account during the review.
- Explain the decision/outcome of the review and the reasons for it.

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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 Governance Manager who the complainant can contact to discuss the letter.
- Be signed by the Governance Manager.

### **8.5 Recording the outcome of a review and notifying relevant staff**

Like all other decisions made under this policy, the Governance Manager is responsible for keeping a record of the outcome of the review, updating case management system and notifying all relevant staff of the outcome of the review including if the restriction has been withdrawn.

See Parts 2.2 and 5.5 above.

## **9.0 Managing staff stress**

### **9.1 Staff reactions to stressful situations**

Dealing with complainants who are demanding, abusive, aggressive or violent can be extremely stressful and at times distressing or even frightening for all our staff – both experienced and inexperienced. It is perfectly normal to get upset or experience stress 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 help of all Port Stephens Council staff to identify stressful incidents and situations. As a result, all staff have a responsibility to notify relevant supervisors/senior managers of UCC incidents and any stressful incidents that they believe require management involvement.

### **9.2 Debriefing**

Debriefing means talking things through following a difficult or stressful incident. It is an important way of 'off-loading' or dealing with stress. Many staff members naturally do this with colleagues after a difficult telephone call, but debriefing can also be done 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 an external professional service on a needs basis. All staff can access the Employee Assistance Program with AccessEAP – a free, confidential counselling service. To make an appointment call: 1800 81 87 28 or (02) 8247 9191

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### **10.0 Other remedies**

#### **10.1 Compensation for injury**

Any staff member who suffers injury as a result of aggressive behaviour from complainants is entitled to make a workers' compensation claim. Organisation Development will assist wherever possible in processing claims. If you are the victim of an assault, they may also be able to apply to the Victim's Compensation Tribunal for compensation.

#### **10.2 Compensation for damage to clothing or personal affects**

Where damage is suffered to clothing or personal effects as a result of aggression by a complainant, compensation may be sought. A written application should be lodged with Council detailing the circumstances and the value of the loss.

#### **10.3 Legal Assistance**

If a staff member is physically attacked, or is a victim of employment generated harassment and the police do not lay charges, the General Manager will consider providing reasonable legal assistance if the staff members wishes to take civil action. This will be at the discretion of the General Manager.

#### **10.4 Threats outside the office or outside working hours**

Where threats are directed at a particular staff member and it appears those threats may be carried out outside normal working hours or outside the office, the staff member will receive the support of the office. Requests for such assistance should be made to the Governance Manager.

#### **10.5 Escorts home**

When a staff member fears for their safety following a threat from a complainant, another staff member may accompany them home or the organisation can meet the cost of the staff member going home in a taxi. Enquiry with the Governance Manager for more information.

#### **10.6 Telephone threats on home numbers**

If a staff member or their family have been harassed by telephone at their home and they believe it is connected with their employment they may apply to have the office meet the cost of having their telephone number changed and/or made silent. The staff member should also contact their telephone carrier, as they may provide an interception/monitoring service.

If assistance is approved, the office will meet the cost incurred for a period up to 12 months. Once approval is given, the staff member is responsible for making the necessary arrangements and will be reimbursed after producing a paid account.

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Applications for reimbursement must be approved by the Governance Manager and/or the General Manager.

### 10.7 Other security measures

If other security measures are necessary, the office will give consideration to providing all reasonable support to ensure the safety and welfare of the staff member.

### 11.0 Training and awareness

Port Stephens 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 in particular, on induction.

### 12.0 Ombudsman may request copies of our records

Port Stephens 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.

## DEFINITIONS:

### Complaint

Expression of dissatisfaction made to or about us, our services, staff or the handling of a complaint where a response or resolution is explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.

A complaint covered by this Policy can be distinguished from:

- staff grievances [see our grievance procedure]
- public interest disclosures made by our staff [see our internal reporting policy]
- code of conduct complaints [see our code of conduct]
- responses to requests for feedback about the standard of our service provision [see the definition of 'feedback' below]
- reports of problems or wrongdoing merely intended to bring a problem to our notice with no expectation of a response [see definition of 'feedback']
- service requests [see definition of 'service request' below], and
- requests for information [see our access to information policy].

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Complaint management system	All policies, procedures, practices, staff, hardware and software used by Council the management of complaints.
Complainant	Person/s who makes a complaint.
Dispute	An unresolved complaint escalated either within or outside of the organisation.
Feedback	Opinions, comments and expressions of interest or concern, made directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, to or about us, about our services or complaint handling where a response is not explicitly or implicitly expected or legally required.
Grievance	A clear, formal written statement by an individual staff member about another staff member or a work related problem.
Organisation	Port Stephens Council
Policy	A statement or instruction that sets out how we should fulfil our vision, mission and goals.
Practice Manual	The NSW Ombudsman's Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual (2nd edition)
Premises	Any property or land owned by Port Stephens Council.
Procedure	A statement or instruction that sets out how our policies will be implemented and by whom.
Senior Manager	Group Managers and Section Managers of Port Stephens Council.
Service request	Service request includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• requests for approval</li> <li>• requests for action</li> <li>• routine inquiries about the organisation's business</li> <li>• requests for the provision of services and assistance</li> <li>• reports of failure to comply with laws regulated by the</li> </ul>

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- organisation requests for explanation of policies, procedures and decisions.

Unreasonable complainant conduct (UCC)

Any behaviour by a current or former complainant which, because of its nature or frequency raises substantial health, safety, resource or equity issues for our organisation, our staff, other service users and complainants or the complainant himself/herself.

UCC can be divided into five categories of conduct:

- Unreasonable arguments
- Unreasonable behaviour
- Unreasonable demands
- Unreasonable lack of cooperation
- Unreasonable persistence

**POLICY STATEMENT:**

Port Stephens Council is committed to being accessible and responsive to all complainants who approach our organisation for assistance and/or with a complaint. At the same time the success of our organisation depends on:

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

When complainants behave unreasonably in their dealings with us, their conduct can significantly affect our success. As a result, Port Stephens Council will take proactive and decisive action to manage any complainant conduct that negatively and unreasonably affects us and will support our staff to do the same in accordance with this policy.

**POLICY RESPONSIBILITIES:**

- 1) All staff are responsible for implementing and complying with this policy.
- 2) The Governance Manager is responsible for implementing, complying with, monitoring, evaluating, reviewing and providing advice on the policy.

**RELATED DOCUMENTS:**

- 1) *Local Government Act 1993*
- 2) *Public Interest Disclosure Act 1994*
- 3) *Ombudsman Act 1974*

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- 4) *Independent Commission Against Corruption 1988*
- 5) *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*
- 6) *Code of Conduct*

This policy is compliant with and supported by the following documents:

- Work, Health and Safety Management Directive
- Complaint Handling Policy
- Alternative Dispute Resolution Policy
- NSW Ombudsman - Managing Unreasonable Complainant Conduct Practice Manual (2nd edition)

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In order for Port Stephens 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 rights<sup>ii</sup>****Complainants have the right:**

- to make a complaint and to express their opinions in ways that are reasonable, lawful and appropriate<sup>iii</sup>
- to a reasonable explanation of the organisation's complaints procedure, including details of the confidentiality, secrecy and/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 case<sup>iv</sup>
- to a fair hearing<sup>v</sup>
- to a timely response
- to be informed in at least general terms about the actions taken and outcome of their complaint<sup>vi</sup>
- to be given reasons that explain decisions affecting them
- to at least one right of review of the decision on the complaint<sup>vii</sup>
- to be treated with courtesy and respect
- to communicate valid concerns and views without fear of reprisal or other unreasonable response.<sup>viii</sup>

**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 circumstances<sup>ix</sup>
- 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 environment<sup>x</sup>
- to modify, curtail or decline service (if appropriate) in response to unacceptable behaviour by a complainant.<sup>xi</sup>

**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 the [name of organisation]

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- to be informed (at an appropriate time) about the substance of the allegations made against them that are being investigated<sup>xii</sup>
- 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 made<sup>xiii</sup>
- 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 Port Stephens Council with courtesy and respect
- clearly identifying to the best of their ability the issues of complaint, or asking for help from the staff of Port Stephens Council to assist them in doing so
- providing to the best of their ability Port Stephens Council with all the relevant information available to them at the time of making the complaint
- being honest in all communications with Port Stephens Council
- informing Port Stephens Council of any other action they have taken in relation to their complaint<sup>xiv</sup>
- cooperating with the staff who are assigned to assess/ investigate/resolve/determine or otherwise deal with their complaint.

If complainants do not meet their responsibilities, Port Stephens Council may consider placing limitations or conditions on their ability to communicate with staff or access certain services. Port Stephens 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.<sup>xv</sup> Any such 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 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 made<sup>xvi</sup>
- informing people or organisations the subject of investigation, at an appropriate time, about the substance of the allegations made against them<sup>xvii</sup> and the substance of any proposed adverse comment or decision that they may need to answer or address<sup>xviii</sup>
- keeping complainants informed of the actions taken and the outcome of their complaints<sup>xix</sup>
- giving complainants reasons that are clear and appropriate to their circumstances and

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- adequately explaining the basis of any decisions that affect them
- treating complainants and any people the subject of complaint with courtesy and respect at all times and in all circumstances
- taking all reasonable and practical steps to ensure that complainants<sup>xx</sup> are not subjected to any detrimental action in reprisal for making their complaint<sup>xxi</sup>
- giving adequate warning of the consequences of unacceptable behaviour.

If Port Stephens Council or its staff fail to comply with these responsibilities, complainants may complain to the NSW Ombudsman.

### **Subjects of a complaint are responsible for:**

- cooperating with the staff of Port Stephens 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<sup>xxii</sup>
- providing all relevant information in their possession to Port Stephens Council or its authorised staff when required to do so by a properly authorised direction or notice
- being honest in all communications with Port Stephens Council and its staff
- treating the staff of Port Stephens Council with courtesy and respect at all times and in all circumstances
- refraining from taking any detrimental action against the complainant<sup>xxiii</sup> in reprisal for them making the complaint.<sup>xxiv</sup>

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

### **Port Stephens Council is responsible for:**

- having an appropriate and effective complaint handling system in place for receiving, assessing, handling, recording and reviewing complaints
- decisions about how all complaints will be dealt with
- ensuring that all complaints are dealt with professionally, fairly and impartially<sup>xxv</sup>
- 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 circumstances<sup>xxvi</sup>
- implementing reasonable and appropriate policies/procedures/practices to ensure that complainants<sup>xxvii</sup> are not subjected to any detrimental action in reprisal for making a complaint<sup>xxviii</sup>, including maintaining separate complaint files and other operational files relating to the issues raised by individuals who make complaints
- giving adequate consideration to any confidentiality, secrecy and/or privacy obligations or responsibilities that may arise in the handling of complaints and the conduct of investigations.

If Port Stephens Council fails to comply with these responsibilities, complainants may complain to the NSW Ombudsman.

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<sup>ii</sup> 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.

<sup>iii</sup> 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.

<sup>iv</sup> 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.

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> Provided this will not prejudice on-going or reasonably anticipated investigations or disciplinary/criminal proceedings.

<sup>vii</sup> Such a right of review can be provided internally to the organisation, for example by a person not connected to the original decision.

<sup>viii</sup> 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.

<sup>ix</sup> 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 Endnote 25].

<sup>x</sup> See for example WH&S laws and the common law duty of care on employers.

<sup>xi</sup> Unacceptable behaviour includes verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, threats, etc.

<sup>xii</sup> 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.

<sup>xiii</sup> 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.

<sup>xiv</sup> For example whether they have made a similar complaint to another relevant person or body or have relevant legal proceedings at foot.

<sup>xv</sup> Other than in circumstances where the organisation is obliged to have an ongoing relationship with the complainant.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Endnote 11.

<sup>xvii</sup> Other than where an allegation is so lacking in merit that it can be dismissed at the outset.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Endnote 11.

<sup>xix</sup> See Endnote 5.

<sup>xx</sup> 'Complainants' include whistleblowers/people who make internal disclosures.

<sup>xxi</sup> 'Complaints' includes disclosures made by whistleblowers/people who make internal disclosures.

<sup>xxii</sup> This does not include any obligation to incriminate themselves in relation to criminal or disciplinary proceedings, unless otherwise provided by statute.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Endnote 19.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See Endnote 20.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Endnote 3.

<sup>xxvi</sup> 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.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Endnote 19.

Policy

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ITEM 9 - ATTACHMENT 1      MANAGING UNREASONABLE COMPLAINANT  
CONDUCT POLICY

## Policy



<sup>xxviii</sup> See Endnote 20.

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<b>Process owner</b>	Governance Manager		
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1.0		Governance Manager	Drafted new policy based on the model policy of the NSW Ombudsman.	

## Policy

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