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**Mid Ulster District Council**

Customer Service Policy

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1. **Introduction**

As an organisation which is primarily service-based and which has increasing responsibility for the planning, design and delivery of services which significantly impact all aspects of the lives of local people, Mid Ulster District Council is committed to adopting a customer-focused approach to its work.

This Policy will establish the principles to which the Council is committed, together with procedures and standards for staff, through which the Council expects to demonstrate excellence in customer service.

The policy has been created to reflect the broad elements and principles within the Customer Services World Host guidance.

The Council has also developed a Digital Strategy which is person centred. Three of the key themes of the Strategy consider collaboration and engagement; rethinking and simplifying processes and using technology and tools that enable better services. The full strategy including the Vision can be viewed at [Digital Transformation Strategy | Mid Ulster District Council (midulstercouncil.org)](https://www.midulstercouncil.org/your-council/policies-documents/digital-transformation-strategy)

The Policy has been created to reflect the standards set down in the Council's Customer Care Charter, which has been appended to this Policy. The Charter Objectives detail the standards of service customers can expect.

**2.0 Policy Aims & Objectives**

 The Customer Service Policy aims to create an organisational culture which:

* focuses on the needs of customers in the design and delivery of services, whether internal or external.
* seeks, listens and acts on the views of its customers.
* values customer views, compliments and complaints as important sources of information for putting things right and as opportunities to improve service delivery.

The Policy objectives are to:

* promote a positive customer service ethos across the organisation.
* ensure staff understand customer service values and demonstrate them in their behaviours and interaction with all customers.
* develop appropriate and measurable standards\*1 across all customer access channels.
* ensure that meaningful engagement and consultation with customers takes place.
* ensure that the results of engagement, consultation and feedback are used to influence strategic and operational decisions.

**3.0 Policy Scope**

Everyone with whom the Council comes into contact, externally and internally, is a customer and therefore the Customer Service Policy affects residents, visitors, other organisations across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, and all Council staff.

The Policy and its procedures apply in all circumstances except where:

* other procedures are prescribed by law
* legislative or other requirements take precedence

i.e. Freedom of Information Act, Data Subject Access Requests, Planning Regulations etc

The Policy does not apply to complaints handling (please refer to Complaints Handling Procedures [Complaints | Mid Ulster District Council (midulstercouncil.org)](https://www.midulstercouncil.org/complaints) for guidance.

**4.0 Linkage to Corporate Plan**

 The Council’s Corporate Plan (2024-2028) has three key themes:

* Our Service Delivery
* Leadership & Partnership for Local Growth
* Being the Best Council Possible

One of the values within ‘Our Service Delivery’ theme focuses on customer services which will put citizens and customers first and help improve the customer’s engagement and interaction with the Council.

**5.0 Roles & Responsibilities**

The Customer Service Policy acknowledges that good customer service is dependant upon a commitment from the Council as a Corporate body and is the responsibility of all Council employees.

* Elected Members will endorse the Policy, its implementation and procedures.
* The Senior Management Team will demonstrate its commitment to the Policy by adopting the customer service values and principles, promoting them among the Assistant Directors, Heads of Service and Managers, and through them, the wider staff, monitoring performance and recommending change to improve customer service.
* Assistant Directors, Heads of Services and Managers will adopt and promote the customer service values and principles, ensure procedures are applied consistently across their areas of service responsibility, review standards and performance, encourage staff training and, based on customer feedback and experience, recommend developments and improvements to the Senior Management Team.
* The Organisational Development, Strategy & Performance Directorate and the Customer Experience Manager through the Customer Services Officer/Team will support the dissemination of the customer service ethos throughout the organisation, particularly through planned customer service training and development programmes.
* All staff will demonstrate the customer service values and principles through their positive behaviour and professional approach to the delivery of their services and by participating in ongoing training and development opportunities.

**6.0 Procedure & Implementation**

 This Policy is subject to a set of core Customer Service principles:

**6.1** **Customer Service Principles**

* We will design and deliver our services around customers, rather than business processes.
* We will be professional, confidential, helpful and courteous at all times.
* We will be open, transparent and proactive in our information provision.
* We will act with fairness, integrity and impartiality, affording equal respect to all.
* We will use a mix of contact channels for our customers to help them reach us in a way which best suits their needs.
* We will maintain our standards across all customer contact channels and at all stages of the customer journey.
* We will undertake regular, appropriate and effective consultation with our customers to identify their needs, to inform our decisions and improve our services and performance.
* We will monitor our performance, evaluate and act on the outcomes.
* We will seek to be efficient in our customer service, using technology appropriately to improve the flexibility and accessibility of customer contact.
* We will develop a high standard of customer service by investing in our staff training and development and engaging with them on customer service issues.
* We will provide and maintain safe and clean facilities for our customers, minimising risk or injury to our customers and our staff.

**6.2 Customer Service Standards & Procedures**

These procedures apply in all circumstances except where other procedures are prescribed by law or other legislative requirements take precedence, i.e. Freedom of Information Act, Data Subject Access Requests, Planning Regulations etc

**6.2.1 Council Facilities: Public Reception Areas**

In principle, any Council building which is open to the public is a potential customer access point for Council services.

Public reception areas in these facilities are generally multi-functional, where staff meet and greet visitors, provide telephone answering services, signpost to other organisations, deliver services directly and support other services.

They are, therefore, prime customer facing points requiring well-trained and knowledgeable staff.

Customer facing staff working in public reception areas will:

* wear the agreed corporate uniform.
* wear the agreed corporate name badge.
* greet every customer.
* give priority to those customers present in the reception area over telephone answering, dealing with other issues or dealing with staff.
* not use personal mobile phones at their work station, except in cases of emergency.
* will adhere to the objectives of the Council’s Customer Care Charter.

Council staff who do not work in public reception areas but who interact or transact business with customers in those spaces, will give priority to dealing with those customers and will adhere to the principles, procedures and standards of the Customer Service policy.

Council staff who do not work in public reception areas will only spend time in those areas and with the reception-based staff when they are dealing with work-related issues.

Council will aim to provide a welcoming, clean and tidy office reception space, making the offices as accessible as possible for everyone, and provide an area to facilitate private discussions as necessary.

Council will display up-to-date information in a prominent position to include details of the Council’s Customer Care Charter and how customers can provide feedback on service delivery/customer journey; the Complaints Handling Procedures etc. Information can be provided in a range of formats. Please use the attached link to the Council’s Accessibility Statement for guidance [Accessibility statement for Mid Ulster District Council | Mid Ulster District Council (midulstercouncil.org)](https://www.midulstercouncil.org/accessibility)

**6.2.2 Telephone Answering**

The telephone remains an important communication channel for customers contacting the Council and is currently the predominant method when making service enquiries. Maintaining a high standard of customer telephone contact across the organisation is, therefore, essential to the perception of the Council as a customer-focussed organisation.

* All staff will aim to answer phone calls within 20 seconds.
* All staff will answer the phone to an external caller by saying good morning, good afternoon, good evening, followed by the council/department/service name as appropriate, followed by their first name and a phrase, such as ‘can I help you?’ or ‘how can I help you?’.
* All staff will endeavour to deal with customer queries and requests directly and will only transfer a call to another member of staff if the caller specifically requests to speak to a named officer or if they do not have the information required.
* All staff will endeavour to support customers with Council form filling and/or navigation of the Council’s website (online applications).
* Where a caller wishes to speak to a member of staff who is unavailable, the staff member dealing with the call must always offer to help, take a message or, if applicable, provide a mobile telephone number.
* If a member of staff is on leave, the call should be transferred to another nominated member of staff who will be able to deal with the issue or query.
* If a call cannot be dealt with directly or transferred to an appropriate officer for response, a message should record the caller’s contact details and sufficient information about the subject of the call. Staff should avoid requesting the customer to call back but rather arrangements be made for them to be contacted. Telephone messages must be communicated in a timely manner. Where a message has been communicated to the relevant Service, staff within that Service should follow up.
* Where an issue or query raised by telephone cannot be dealt with immediately, the responsible officer will provide a reply as soon as possible, adhering to the response times for written communication, but recognising that telephone contact is expected to be, and should be, considerably more rapid.
* Where a caller contacts the Council about a service, facility or responsibility of another organisation, all staff will provide a ‘signposting’ service, providing points of contact for the other organisation whenever possible.
* Voicemail should not be used as ‘out of office’ cover for extended periods of time. Calls should be diverted to an appropriate extension and/or mobile telephone number.
* The use of speakerphones should be avoided in public reception areas. Staff should be mindful of the importance of confidentiality, potential sensitivity of business being conducted and data protection issues when communicating with customers.
* Call ringing volumes should be set to an acceptable level for external incoming calls to ensure they are audible and can be picked up within prescribed timescales.

**6.2.3 Written Communication**

Any letter or email communication is accepted by the recipient as being from ‘the Council’ and therefore all care must be taken to ensure that content, language and grammar is correct and the tone of the correspondence is suitable.

While often considered more informal, particularly when used internally, email communication should adhere to the same standards as traditional letters.

As well as the standards below, written communication will also follow guidance contained in the Communications Policy, specifically those parts relating to the use of the Council’s brand, font type and size, and the procedure for managing requests for information in alternative formats, including languages other than English.

* All letters issued by Council officers will be issued on the official Mid Ulster District Council letterhead.
* Where hard copy information, which does not require an accompanying letter, is being issued by post, an official Mid Ulster District Council compliment slip should be used.
* In formal written correspondence, the Council will be referred to as Mid Ulster District Council.
* In all written communication, the first name and surname of the officer signing the correspondence will be used, together with job title. Contact details, including direct dial telephone numbers and email address, where applicable, will be provided to ensure customers have an easily identifiable point of contact. Normally, formal correspondence will be signed by a senior member of staff (Chief Executive, Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Head of Service, Manager or other officer designated by a Strategic Director).
* Standard phrases to close letters will be used as appropriate, that is ‘yours sincerely’ or ‘yours faithfully’. When appropriate, officers may use less formal closing phrases, such as ‘kind regards’ or ‘best wishes’. Phrases such as ‘yours in sport’ are not to be used.
* All staff with an ‘@midulstercouncil.org’ email address must use the standard email template, including the agreed signature template in line with the Council’s Brand Guidelines (please refer to Marketing and Communications for further information).
* Out of office automatic email response must be enabled where a member of staff will be absent for more than 1 working day. The out of office message must provide an alternative point of contact for enquiries.
* All correspondence by letter received by the Council will be acknowledged within 3 working days (except where other legislative requirements take precedence), unless a full response is to be issued in the interim period. Acknowledgements should be issued by email whenever possible.
* All external correspondence received by email will be acknowledged within 3 working days (except where other legislative requirements take precedence), unless a full response is to be issued in the interim period.
* All correspondence will receive a response within 15 working days (except where other legislative requirements take precedence). Where a response cannot be issued within the 15 working day timeframe, the Council will contact the customer to provide an explanation and a new target response time.
* When appropriate, a response to written correspondence can be made by telephone or in person, in which case a file note should be made and retained to record details of the contact, including date, time and outcome.

Councillors routinely receive written correspondence, by letter, by email and via on-line channels and routinely respond in their capacity as individual elected members.

* Where an elected member receives correspondence relating to Council business in an official capacity (as Chair, Deputy Chair or Chair of a Committee), the appropriate senior Council officer will, on request, assist in providing information to facilitate a response which reflects the corporate position or, if requested, draft a response.

**6.3 Standards for Our Customers**

We are committed to providing a high-quality service that meets the needs of our customers. In return, we expect certain standards from our customers:

* We expect our customers to treat all of our staff with the respect that they themselves would wish to receive.
* We do not expect our customers to threaten, physically or verbally abuse any of our staff.
* In the event that we make a mistake, we will always try to make amends. Abuse of staff in these or any other circumstances does not help any situation. During a telephone call, should such abuse reach an unacceptable level, staff will politely end the conversation. In person-to-person circumstances staff will remove themselves from the situation and call for assistance if required. All incidents of abusive behaviour will be recorded and will be addressed under the relevant policy.
* We expect all our customers to co-operate with any reasonable instructions or requests from our staff.
* Our customers will not wilfully harm things owned by the Council, Councillors or staff.

**6.3.1 Aggressive or Abusive Behaviour**

Violence is not restricted to acts of aggression that may result in physical harm. It also includes behaviour or language (whether oral or written) that may cause staff to feel afraid, threatened or abused.

Examples of actions or behaviours which fall under this heading include threats, physical violence, personal verbal abuse, derogatory remarks, and rudeness. Inflammatory statements and unsubstantiated allegations may be regarded as abusive behaviour.

Staff can expect to be treated courteously and with respect. Violence or abuse towards staff is unacceptable. Staff understand that the anger felt by many complainants is directed towards the subject matter of their complaint. However, it is not acceptable when that anger escalates into aggression directed towards staff.

**6.3.2 Unreasonable Demands**

Customers may make unreasonable demands through the amount of information they seek, the nature and scale of service they expect, or the number of approaches they make. What amounts to unreasonable demands will always depend on the circumstances surrounding the behaviour, and the seriousness of the issues raised by the customer.

Examples of actions which fall under this heading include vexatious complaints, demanding responses within an unreasonable timescale, insisting on seeing or speaking to a particular member of staff who is unavailable, continual phone calls or letters, repeatedly changing the substance and focus of the issue, or raising unrelated concerns. Such demands may be considered unacceptable and unreasonable.

**6.3.3 Unreasonable Persistence**

Some customers will not, or cannot, accept that the Council is unable to assist them further or provide a level of service other than that provided already. Customers may persist in disagreeing with the action or decision taken in relation to their issue or contact the Council persistently about the same issue. The actions of persistent complainants are considered to be unacceptable when they take up a disproportionate amount of time and resources.

**6.3.4 Managing Unacceptable Actions or Behaviour**

To manage unacceptable actions or behaviour, the Council may decide to restrict contact in person, by telephone, letter or electronically, or by any combination of these.

**7.0 Equality Screening & Impact Assessment**

The policy has equality screened in accordance with the Council’s screening and impact assessment process. No impact was identified.

**7.1** **Staff & Financial Resources**

Initial training for all front-line staff is provided by the Council’s World Host Training Programme and ongoing via Learning and Development Training Programmes.

Implementation of the policy requires the release of staff across the organisation to attend core customer service training, with regular refresher training for key customer-facing staff.

Each Directorate will determine their own appropriate Service training needs.

**8.0 Support & Advice**

For further information about the policy, please contact Arlene McIlwrath, Customer Experience Manager.

**9.0 Communication**

The policy will be communicated internally using a range of appropriate internal communication methods, with external communication via traditional print and digital channels.

The policy will also from part of the induction process for all new staff.

**10.0 Monitoring & Review Arrangements**

The effectiveness of the policy will be monitored using feedback from those staff involved in its implementation and data collated on performance against standards.

Formal review, with any appropriate recommendations for change, will take place annually.

***\*1 Measurable Standards (Reference Page 4)***

* *80% of calls picked up in <5 seconds*
* *Emails replied to within defined timescales*
* *Footfall enquires handled promptly*