Complaint Handling Policy

Purpose

This policy outlines Wodonga Council's approach to complaint management, ensuring that every complaint is handled in a fair, respectful and transparent manner, in accordance with the *Local Government Act 2020* and the Child Safe Standards.

Objective

This policy aims to:

- Ensure staff understand their responsibilities in handling complaints professionally.
- Make the complaint process accessible and inclusive for all, including children and vulnerable groups.
- Promote a respectful, inclusive, and child-safe complaints culture.
- Support continuous improvement through analysis of complaint data.
- Enable timely, impartial, and thorough resolution of complaints.
- Provide clear internal and external review pathways.
- Support statutory obligations and public confidence in Council services.

Scope

This policy applies to all Council staff as well as contractors and volunteers. It covers complaints made by or on behalf of children and young people. It does not cover complaints against Councillors or the CEO.

Key Definitions

- **Complaint**: An expression of dissatisfaction about:
  - the quality of an action taken, decision made, or service provided by a member of Council staff or a contractor engaged by the Council; or
  - the delay by a member of Council staff or a contractor engaged by the Council in taking an action, making a decision or providing a service; or
  - a policy or decision made by Council or a member of Council staff or a contractor.
- **Unreasonable complaint behaviour**: Complaint behaviour that, due to its nature or frequency, causes health, safety, resource or equity issues for Council and its staff or other service users and complainants themselves.
- **Child-related complaint**: A complaint involving harm and/or abuse of children by adults and by other children, or breaches of child safety obligations.
- **Child Safe Standards**: Compulsory standards to ensure child-safe organisational practices.

Policy

Council is committed to a high standard of service and values feedback to improve our operations. We ensure that all complaints are managed in a process that is:

- **Accessible**: Multiple, inclusive ways to submit complaints.
- **Fair and objective**: Free from bias or conflict of interest.
- **Transparent**: Clear steps and communication throughout.

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- **Accountable**: Monitoring and learning from complaints.
- **Safe**: Especially for children and vulnerable persons.

Children and Young People

Council empowers children and young people to raise concerns.

We:

- Respond promptly and thoroughly to child-related complaints.
- Make complaint channels inclusive for Aboriginal, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), LGBTQIA+, and children with a disability.
- Refer serious matters to relevant authorities (e.g., Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP), Police, Child Protection).

How to make a complaint

Anyone affected by a Council action, decision, service, delay or policy may lodge a complaint. Complaints can be made:

- **By mail**: PO Box 923, Wodonga VIC 3689
- **By phone**: (02) 6022 9300
- **By email**: info@wodonga.vic.gov.au
- **In person**: 104 Hovell St, Wodonga VIC 3690
- **Online**: www.wodonga.vic.gov.au
- **Translating and Interpreting Services (TIS)**: 131 450 or visit www.tisnational.gov.au
- **National Relay Service**
  - **TTY**: 133 677 → ask for (02) 6022 9300
  - **Speak and Listen**: 1300 555 727 → ask for (02) 6022 9300
  - **Internet relay**: iprelay.com.au → ask for (02) 6022 9300

Unreasonable complaint conduct

Council requires staff to be respectful and responsive in all of their communications with members of the public.

It expects the same of the community when they communicate with Council staff. Any occurrence of occupational violence, threats or abuse will not be tolerated.

Council may change the way it communicates with complainants engaging in unreasonable complaint behaviour, including but not limited to stopping any investigations or reviews into the complaint.

Information to include when making a complaint:

- Contact details (optional if anonymous)
- Description of the issue, including relevant dates and locations
- Desired outcome

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You may remain anonymous when making a complaint, however this may impact Council's ability to investigate and respond to the complaint.

Council will make reasonable efforts to support people who may require assistance to make a complaint, including children and people with disabilities.

Complaint Handling Process

Initial Assessment

Complaints are acknowledged within five business days and assessed for appropriate handling. Staff will also identify any child safety or vulnerability issues. Where child safety or vulnerability issues are identified, staff will:

- discuss with the complainant how best to provide support and assistance during the process; and
- undertake a risk assessment to determine how to mitigate any risks to children while the complaint process is underway.

If a complaint involves alleged abuse or harm of children and concerns about child safety, Council will report the matter to the appropriate authorities and cooperate with law enforcement.

Council may decline to deal with the complaint if there is a more appropriate pathway the complainant should use, such as seeking a statutory review of the relevant decision complained of (e.g. because they have a right of appeal to VCAT).

If such a complaint is made, it may be referred to a senior officer independent of the person who made the decision to determine the appropriate resolution pathway.

Complaints received are handled using the following four-tiered approach.

1. **Frontline Resolution**: Resolve immediately at first contact.
2. **Investigation:** If the complainant is not satisfied or further investigation is required, the complaint will be referred to the relevant team or manager.
3. **Internal Review:** If the complainant is not satisfied with the outcome of the Investigation, they can request an internal review.
4. **External Review:** If the complainant is not satisfied with the process or outcome of the internal review, the council will inform them of any external avenues through which they can pursue their complaint.

Timeframes

Investigations aim to be completed within 30 calendar days. Complainants will be updated every 30 days, if the process remains ongoing after this period of time.

Investigations may include:

- Reviewing legislation, policies, and records
- Speaking to involved parties
- Documenting findings
- External investigations (including under legal client privilege)

On completion of the Investigation, unless Council is prevented by confidentiality or privacy obligations, the outcome and explanation will be provided in writing (plus a phone call where appropriate).

Internal Review

If a complainant is dissatisfied, they can request an internal review by contacting Council via standard methods.

Requests should include:

- Reasons for dissatisfaction
- Any new evidence
- Concerns with fairness or process

A senior officer who is independent of the person who took the action, made the decision or provided the service which is the subject of the complaint will complete the review and respond within 30 calendar days. An internal review may lead to the original decision being upheld or overturned.

External Review

If a complainant believes that Council has made the wrong decision, they may seek an external review. A complaint can be escalated to the following organisations:

Complaint Type	Organisation
Actions or decisions of a council, council staff and contractors. This includes failure to consider human rights or failure to act compatibly with a human right under the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic).*	Victorian Ombudsman ombudsman.vic.gov.au
Local Government Act breaches	Local Government Inspectorate lgi.vic.gov.au
Privacy or FOI	Office of the Victorian Information Commission ovic.vic.gov.au
Corruption or whistleblower	Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) ibac.vic.gov.au
Discrimination	Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (VEOHRC) humanrights.vic.gov.au
Council elections	Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) vec.vic.gov.au
Child Safety	Victoria Police police.vic.gov.au

	Child Protection services.dffh.vic.gov.au/child-protection

Learning from Complaints

Council analyses complaint data to:

- Identify trends and service improvement opportunities
- Monitor child-related complaint issues
- Report regularly to the executive team

Privacy

Complaint data is managed in line with privacy laws. Personal information is:

- Used only for complaint resolution and analysis
- Stored securely
- Removed or anonymised when used for reporting

Responsibilities

All council staff, councillors and council contractors are responsible for contributing to our complaints process.

Role	Responsibilities
CEO	Promote positive complaint culture, review data, oversee child safety compliance
Senior leaders and managers	Train and support staff, oversee complaint trends, manage conflicts of interest
All council staff	Follow complaint procedures, escalate child safety issues, support vulnerable complainants
Councillors	Refer complaints to staff, model child-safe leadership
Contractors/Volunteers	Cooperate with complaint processes, understand child safety obligations

Staff Training

Relevant staff will be trained in:

- Child Safe Standards and obligations

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Related policies

- *Privacy Policy*
- *Human Rights Policy*
- *Customer Service Charter*
- *Instrument of Delegation*
- *Public interest disclosure procedure*
- *Staff Code of Conduct*

Related legislation

- *Local Government Act 2020 (Vic)*
- *Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic)*
- *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 (Vic)*
- *Equal Opportunity Act 2010(Vic)*
- *Public Interest Disclosures Act 2012 (Vic)*
- *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 (Vic)*
- *Privacy and Data Protection Act 2014 (Vic)*

References

- Making a Complaint – Children's guide
- Child Safe Standards (CCYP)
- Victorian Ombudsman – Good practice guide: Complaint handling for Victorian public sector organisations April 2025

Review

The council may review this policy at any time but unless otherwise requested at least every four years from date of adoption. Minor amendments to the policy may be authorised by the CEO at any time where such changes do not alter the substance of the policy eg: typographical errors, a change to the name of a related policy, or a change to the name of legislation.

Title:	Draft Complaint Handling Policy
Reference No:	
Business Unit:	Community and Corporate
Category:	
Approved By:	Council, at its meeting of XXXX
Next Review:	XXXX