



ADMINISTRATIVE COMPLAINTS PROCESS POLICY

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Complaints to be welcomed

- Anyone who is dissatisfied about a decision or other action of the council, a council officer can easily and simply lodge a complaint.
- Complainants are to be provided with information on the complaints process and, if necessary, assistance to make their complaint.
- Each complaint is initially assessed in terms of its seriousness, safety implications, complexity and degree of urgency.
- Council officers will receive complaints in a professional manner and welcome valid feedback as an opportunity for improvement of the council's administrative practices.
- Complaints are to be responded to as quickly as possible and in accordance with the timeframes set out in the complaints process.
- Complainants will not suffer any reprisal from council or its officers for making a complaint.
- Complaints are properly monitored with a view to continuous improvement of the council's business processes.
- If a complainant is not satisfied that a complaint has been satisfactorily resolved, he/she will be informed of any statutory right of review and, if they request, be provided with details of any further review mechanism that is available.

2. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The complaints process has been established for resolving complaints by affected persons about administrative action of the council.

However, the complaints process does not apply to a complaint-

- that relate to competitive neutrality issues;
- about official misconduct that should be directed to the Crime and Corruption Commission; made under the *Whistleblowers Protection Act 1994*; or relate to actions of an elected member of Council.

What constitutes a Complaint?

The following represents the variety of feedback that Council receives.

Compliment: Positive feedback about a product or service.

Suggestion: Suggested service or product improvement.

Request for information: An enquiry or request for information about Council services, policies and or procedures.

Request for service: Request for action to be taken in relation to a service or product.

Complaint: Dissatisfaction with a product or service.

This policy specifically deals with complaints only which are further defined as follows:-

“A complaint is a statement of dissatisfaction regarding the unsatisfactory delivery of a product or service offered by Council or the unsatisfactory conduct of Council officers. A complaint may be received in person, over the phone or by written or documented communication including electronic communication”

A complaint should not be confused with an action request. For example:-

A person may phone and request a pothole in a road be repaired. This is a request for service. If they phone to complain that he/she had requested a pothole be repaired weeks ago and nothing had been done, then this constitutes a complaint.

3. DEFINITIONS

Terms used in the complaints process have the following meanings:

- *administrative action* – an administrative action of the council, being an action about a matter of administration, including each of the following-
 - (a) a decision and an act;
 - (b) a failure to make a decision or do an act, including a failure to provide written reasons for a decision;
 - (c) the formulation of a proposal or intention;
 - (d) the making of a recommendation.
- *affected person* – a person who is apparently directly affected by–
 - (a) an administrative action; or
 - (b) an alleged minor breach.
- *CEO* – the chief executive officer of the council.
- *complainant* – the affected person or organisation making a complaint.
- *complaint* – an expression of dissatisfaction by a person regarding a decision or other action of the council.
- *council* – Etheridge Shire Council.
- *council officer* – includes a permanent, temporary, casual or contract member of council's staff.
- *director* – a council director who is generally responsible for various functions of the council and who reports directly to the CEO.
- *Executive Management Team (EMT)* – the CEO and all directors and senior managers
- *General Complaints Process* – the statutory complaints process described in Section 306 of the Local Government Regulation 2012.
- *request for service* – a request for the council to take action to satisfy the needs of a customer or ratepayer. This may be of a physical nature, such as a request to fill a pothole or to collect a stray dog, or a request for information.
- the Act – *Local Government Act 2009*

4. POLICY PROVISIONS

Complaint handling framework

The following framework describes the model adopted by the council for handling complaints:

Stage 1

Preliminary Procedures Review of complaint in council service area where administrative action occurred

Stage 2

Complaint Process

- Internal review by a council officer; or
- External review by a person who is not a council officer

Further review by council, if deemed necessary

Stage 3

Complainant informed of other review options if not satisfied with council decision on complaint eg complaints agency such as the Queensland Ombudsman, other avenues of appeal or review or alternative dispute resolution

STAGE 1 – PRELIMINARY PROCEDURES

Preliminary procedures before a complainant makes a complaint

This section applies if a person makes a complaint about an administrative action of the council.

When a person makes a complaint without having contacted the relevant service area of the council to try to resolve the complaint, the person may be requested to take this initial step before the complaint will be registered and dealt with under the complaints process.

If the complaint is not resolved by the relevant service area, the complaint will be dealt with in accordance with the complaints process.

Compliance with this section is not a pre-requisite to the submission of a formal written complaint under the complaints process where it is clear on the face of the document or by the nature of the verbal statements that a complaint has been made. In those circumstances the complaint will be dealt with under the complaints process, unless it is earlier resolved to the complainant's satisfaction or is withdrawn by the complainant.

The way a complainant may make a complaint

A complainant may make a complaint in any of the following ways-

- Orally, either by telephone or in person to a council officer
- By email to info@etheridge.qld.gov.au
- In writing (by letter, fax, or by completing the council's complaint form, whether signed or unsigned).

All written and electronic complaints should be addressed to the CEO but a failure to meet this requirement does not invalidate the complaint. The complainant's contact details should be identified so the council can contact the complainant to meet the response obligations of Council but a failure to meet this requirement does not invalidate the complaint. If an oral complaint is received the CEO, or delegate, may request that the complaint be put in writing if it is of a complex nature or contains complex material.

The council officer who receives an oral complaint will record details in the Council's electronic records management system and, if the complaint is not resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, will refer the complaint for action under the complaints process.

All written complaints will be referred to the CEO, or delegate, who will arrange for the complaint details to be recorded in the Council's electronic records management system.

If necessary, assistance may be provided by a council officer to a complainant on how to make a complaint, including how it should be documented. The aim is to clarify the matter of concern to the complainant and the outcome/s sought.

Complaints by agents

If a complaint is lodged on behalf of a person by a professional advisor *eg* a solicitor or accountant, the council will respond direct to that advisor. A complaint lodged by a person as agent for an affected person will be responded to directly to the affected person and not to the agent, unless a letter of authority is provided indicating the agent is acting on behalf of the affected person and the council considers that the appointment as agent has been validly made.

STAGE 2 – COMPLAINT PROCESS

Process for selecting and appointing a complaints officer to investigate complaints

The council, by resolution, may–

- a) Select and appoint the CEO as a complaints officer for the internal review of any complaint, subject to requirements of relevant legislation;
- b) Delegate to the CEO the power to select and appoint a person or persons to be a complaints officer to investigate complaints.

The CEO may delegate his/her powers under (b) to another employee of the council. The investigation is to be undertaken either by way of internal review or external review. Relevant criteria to be applied in making the decision about the method of review are:

Internal review

An internal review of a complaint will be conducted where the administrative action in question was undertaken by a council officer. The review will be conducted by the CEO, or an officer appointed by the CEO or the CEO's delegate, as the complaints officer for the complaint. The complaints officer must not be less senior than the officer who took the administrative action that is being reviewed.

External review

An external review of a complaint will be conducted where the administrative action in question was taken by-

- a) The council or a committee of the council, at a meeting;
- b) The mayor or the chairman of a standing committee acting under statutory or delegated authority;
- c) The CEO; or
- d) A council officer and the requirement that an internal review be conducted by a council officer who is no less senior than the officer who took the administrative action cannot be met (for whatever reason).

Appointment of reviewer

The CEO, or delegate, will assess the nature of the complaint and determine whether the complaint is to be investigated by means of internal review or external review; based on the review criteria, appoint a suitable person as the complaints officer for the complaint from a panel established by the CEO for that purpose; and give the person appointed as the complaints officer an instrument of appointment that also stipulates the date by which the complaints officer must complete the report on the investigation if the complaint is not earlier resolved to the complainant's satisfaction or is withdrawn by the complainant.

The person appointed as a complaints officer for a complaint must have the appropriate knowledge, qualifications, skill and experience, including the relevant investigative, analytical and report-writing skills, to conduct an investigation into the complaint, make findings, formulate recommendations (where appropriate) and prepare a report on the outcome of the investigation for consideration by the council or its delegate. The complaints officer appointed to investigate a complaint by way of internal or external review must not have been involved with the administrative action in question.

Sending complaints to, and their investigation by, the complaints officer

The CEO, or officer authorised by the CEO (“authorised officer”), after the oral or written complaint has been recorded, will arrange for the complaint and other materials, including relevant documents from the council’s records, to be forwarded to the complaints officer for assessment of the complaint as soon as practicable after the officer’s appointment.

The instrument of appointment of a complaints officer must indicate the timeframe for dealing with the complaint. The timeframe for dealing with a complaint will depend on an assessment of the following factors by the CEO or authorised officer:

- the urgency of the situation in terms of loss or damage likely to be suffered if the complaint is not quickly resolved;
- the likelihood that the complaint can be quickly resolved;
- the complexity of the complaint issue/s;
- whether the complaint requires internal review or external review in accordance with the criteria for the selection of a complaints officer for the complaint as set out in the complaints process.

In general terms, the council will endeavour to meet to the following timeframes for dealing with a complaint-

- for urgent matters—within (14) days;
- for non-urgent complaints that are not considered to be complex or where the complaint is to be investigated under the internal review mechanism— within 30 days;
- for complex complaints or where the complaint is to be investigated under the external review mechanism—within 45 days.

If the nominated timeframe for dealing with a complaint cannot be met for any reason, the CEO or delegate may, once only, extend the time for dealing with the complaint and notify the complainant in writing of the extension before the expiry of the initial timeframe. In determining any extension of time, the CEO, or delegate, must consult with the complaints officer for the complaint and fix a date that is reasonable in all the circumstances, but in no case more than 3 months from the date the complaint was received by the council.

The complaints officer will acknowledge receipt of the complaint and any other material, indicating the date of receipt.

If a complaint is resolved to the complainant’s satisfaction before it is sent to a complaints officer for investigation, notice that the complaint has been resolved may be given to the complainant in the same medium by which the complaint was initially made eg an oral response may be given to a complaint that was made orally. However, the council may give a formal written response to a complaint irrespective of the medium by which the complaint was made. The council will make a record of any oral advice given to a complainant that the complaint has been resolved.

As a condition of appointment, an external reviewer will be required, when forwarding his/her investigation report to the CEO, to return all records and documents relating to the investigation.

The timeframe for dealing with a complaint is measured from the date of receipt of a complaint to the date the complainant is informed of the outcome of the complaint.

Opportunity for complainant to provide further information about the complaint

The complaints officer will invite the complainant to provide further information after the initial assessment of the complaint material to assist in fully understanding the complainant’s concerns, the issue/s to be investigated (if an investigation is to be undertaken) and the outcome or remedy sought by the complainant.

Seeking further information from the complainant at this stage of the complaints process may be undertaken by informal means such as telephone, e-mail or face-to-face discussion. The complaints

officer will record a fair summary of any oral information received and will confirm with the complainant in an appropriate manner that the summary accurately reflects the information provided by the complainant.

The complaints officer will attempt to resolve the complaint informally, for example, by providing an explanation for the council's or the councillor's action in the particular case. A complaint may be resolved or withdrawn by the complainant at any time during the complaints process. A complaint is taken to be resolved to the complainant's satisfaction, or is taken to be withdrawn, if the complainant gives a clear indication to that effect to the complaints officer. Written notice that the complaint has been resolved, and the general manner in which it was resolved, will be given to both the council and the complainant.

If in the opinion of the complaints officer, resolution of a complaint about an administrative action merely involves rectification of an obvious error or a remedy of a similar nature, the complaints officer will discuss the issue with the relevant council officer with a view to resolving the complaint.

Grounds for refusal to investigate complaint

In assessing a complaint (including any further information provided by the complainant) the complaints officer will consider whether there is a statutory ground on which the complaint may be refused. The complaints officer may refuse to investigate a complaint or, having started to investigate a complaint, refuse to continue the investigation if the officer reasonably considers that-

- a) the complaint is trivial; or
- b) the complaint concerns frivolous matter or was made vexatiously; or
- c) the complainant does not have a sufficient direct interest in the administrative action or alleged minor breach the subject of the complaint; or
- d) both of the following apply-
 - i. the complainant has a right of appeal, reference or review, or another remedy, that the person has not exhausted;
 - ii. it would be reasonable in the circumstances to require the complainant to exhaust the right or remedy before the officer investigates, or continues to investigate, the complaint;
- e) in the circumstances, investigating the complaint is unnecessary or unjustifiable.

A right or remedy mentioned in paragraph (d) does not include a right to make an application to the Supreme Court under the *Judicial Review Act 1991*.

The complaints officer will give both the council and the complainant written notice of a decision made by the officer to refuse to investigate the complaint, or to continue the investigation, and the reasons for the decision.

Investigating a complaint

The investigation of a complaint will be undertaken by the complaints officer in an independent, impartial and objective manner. A complaints officer may, if the officer considers appropriate in the circumstances, undertake mediation between the parties with a view to resolving a complaint, but will not act as an advocate for either the complainant or the council or for any council officer the subject of the complaint.

The investigation of a complaint will typically involve the following stages-

- preparation of an action plan for conducting the investigation;
- information gathering, including discussions and interviews with the complainant, council personnel and third parties (where relevant) and examining relevant laws and council policies and procedures;
- analysis of all relevant information obtained;
- formulation of findings and any recommendations for the council's consideration;

- preparation of a report on the results of the investigation or the outcome of the complaint if it was resolved during the complaints process or was withdrawn by the complainant.

The complaints officer will adhere to the following principles when conducting an investigation of a complaint:

- Procedural fairness/natural justice;
- Establishment and maintenance of a complete document trail (to facilitate any subsequent review that may be undertaken of the investigation conducted by the complaints officer);
- Council and other policies are designed for administrative guidance only, and should not be rigidly applied irrespective of the merits of a particular case. An administrative policy may be departed from if the merits of a particular case warrant that course of action.
- Lawfulness of a particular action is not necessarily decisive of the issue in dispute. The complaints officer will also assess whether the action was unfair, unreasonable or wrong.
- The civil standard of proof applies for administrative investigations. This means that allegations have to be established on the balance of probabilities – that is, it must be more probable than not that the allegation is made out.
- Confidentiality about the investigation must be maintained to the extent that it can reasonably be achieved, subject to other legal requirements about the disclosure of information.

Obligation of complaints officer on completion of investigation

If a complaint is not resolved during the investigation process to the satisfaction of the complainant or is not withdrawn by the complainant, the complaints officer will give the council and the complainant a written report on the results of the investigation and any recommendations. The complaints officer must give the report to both the council and the complainant within the time stipulated in the instrument of appointment, subject to any approved extension of time.

The report will typically address the following matters to the extent each matter is relevant in the particular case;

- the complaint issue/s;
- a concise summary of the material facts and circumstances of the matter;
- any relevant legislation;
- any relevant council or other policy;
- persons interviewed and/or consulted and relevant information obtained during any interviews and consultations;
- results of any relevant research;
- analysis of complaint issues to the extent necessary;
- findings on material questions of fact and law;
- whether the complaint is sustained and reasons for that finding;
- if the complaint is sustained, any recommendation/s to the council to redress the complainant's grievance, whether by way of benefit to the complainant and other affected persons (if any) and/or systemic improvements to the council's administrative practice with a view to preventing a recurrence of similar complaints.

The report will contain any recommendations that the complaints officer considers to be appropriate in the circumstances. In some cases, it will be appropriate to make a recommendation for procedural improvement even where the complaint has not been sustained.

A recommendation may relate to-

- a specific remedy or remedies that is/are available under legislation to redress the complainant's grievance; and/or
- the proposed amendment of a relevant council policy, procedure or practice to address any systemic issue raised by the complaint with a view to preventing similar complaints in the future.

Remedies

The council has adopted a range of remedies for addressing administrative actions that it considers to be unfair or wrong. Remedies include, but are not limited to-

- an explanation for the action in question
- an admission of fault
- an apology
- revocation or amendment of the decision
- rectification, including repairing or replacing the matter in dispute
- revision of relevant policy, procedure or practice
- provision of technical assistance
- reimbursement of costs incurred as a result of the action in question
- financial compensation, including an *ex-gratia* payment
- waiver of debt.

More than one remedy may be applied in the particular case if the circumstances justify that course of action.

Consideration of report by council

Report about an administrative action

A complaints officer's report prepared under the above process, including any recommendation(s), on a complaint about an administrative action will be considered-

- (a) by the council by resolution if the administrative action in question was taken by-
 - i. the council, or a committee of the council, at a meeting;
 - ii. the mayor or the chairman of a standing committee acting under statutory or delegated authority;
 - iii. the CEO; or
 - iv. another council officer where the requirement that the complaints officer be no less senior than the officer who took the administrative action, cannot be met;
- b) by the CEO under delegated authority if the administrative action in question was taken by a senior officer who reports directly to the CEO;
- c) by another council officer under delegated authority if the administrative action in question was taken by a council officer who is not more senior than the delegate.

A council officer exercising delegated authority to deal with the complaint, by accepting or rejecting the findings of the complaints officer, has authority to provide any lawful remedy for the complainant that is available under the above provisions of the complaints process, irrespective of whether the remedy has been recommended by the complaints officer.

Where the complaints officer's report includes a recommendation that a suitable policy be made to address the complaint issue, or an existing policy be appropriately amended, the recommendation will be referred to the council for consideration by resolution.

Notice to complainant about outcome of complaint

Written notice of the outcome of a complaint will be given to the complainant following the council's consideration of, and decision on, the complaints officer's report and recommendations (if any).

The notice to the complainant will generally include the following advice-

- whether the complaint is sustained;
- if the complaint is not sustained, the reasons for the decision;
- if the complaint is sustained, any remedy to be made available to the complainant
- if applicable, the circumstances and timeframe in which the remedy will be made available; and/or
- whether the investigation identified the need to revise council policy, procedure or practice to prevent similar complaints arising, details of the proposed revision and the timeframe for implementation.

Implementation of remedy, etc

The council, through the CEO or delegate, will take action in a timely manner to implement any remedy to be made available to a complainant and/or any revision of its policy, practice or procedure.

Council review if complainant dissatisfied with outcome of complaint

If a complainant is dissatisfied with the outcome of the consideration of the complaints officer's report and any recommendation, the complainant may request a review of the decision on the complaint. The complainant may submit new information with the request for review and seek reconsideration of the complaint on the basis of the new information or on any other basis.

The council will-

- undertake the review as requested and advise the complainant accordingly; or
- decline the review on the basis that the complainant has not provided any reasonable basis for the review.

Any review undertaken will generally be in accordance with the complaints process. The reviewer will be independent of the original decision maker and the complaints officer.

STAGE 3 – REVIEW BY OMBUDSMAN OR OTHER COMPLAINTS ENTITIES

Review by other complaints entities

If the council decides not to undertake a review, it will inform the complainant that a complaint may be lodged with the Queensland Ombudsman or other relevant complaint entity (giving contact details).

COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Reporting on complaint trends

Every (6) months, commencing from the date the complaints process commenced, the CEO, or delegate, will complete a report on all complaints (oral and written) received through the complaints process, being complaints about administrative actions of the council.

The report will include details for the particular (6) months and the financial year to date and, to the extent details are available, draw comparisons with corresponding periods for the (2) immediately preceding financial years.

Each report will set out-

- details of complaints received and resolved during the period;
- whether timeframes were met;

- how each complaint was dealt with (pre-complaint stage, by complaints officer, council decision on complaints officer's report, or still not resolved to complainant's satisfaction);
- a brief description of the outcome, including any remedy given to a complainant; and
- details of any service delivery or business improvements that have been effected as an outcome of the council's consideration of complaints.

The report will also-

- contain details of any systemic issues that have been identified and/or whether there is any trend in the complaints received; and
- suggest whether any other action should be taken to change service delivery and/or improve business activities, services, systems and staff skills, etc.

The CEO will discuss the report with the executive team and will thereafter submit it to the council for consideration, together with any comments from the executive team.

Details about complaints concerning administrative actions will be provided in the council's annual report, as required by legislation.

6. AUTHORITIES AND ACCOUNTABILITIES

All employees are accountable for the implementation of the policy. Chef Executive Officer is accountable for compliance and reporting.

The council will take appropriate steps to publicise the complaints process. For example, the process will be included on Council's website, included in the induction process for new employees and in other appropriate staff training forums.

7. RELATED DOCUMENTATION

All council policies and procedures must be taken into consideration when considering or investigating a complaint under the complaints process.

8. APPROVAL TABLE

Approved by Council		Meeting number and date	
20 th April 2011 (Resolution No.2011/GM281)		GMCCS9 – 17 October 2016	
		Resolution number	
		2016/GM1857	
Approval by CEO			
Effective date		Review date	
17 th October 2016		16 th October 2018	
Policy Author			
Director Corporate & Community Services			
Current incumbent			
David Munro			
Implementation Officer			
Chief Executive Officer			
Current incumbent		Contact number	Official file no.
Michael Kitzelmann, Chief Executive Officer		4079 9005	

Attachment 1 – External Agency's

Queensland Ombudsman

The Ombudsman investigates complaints about the actions and decisions of Queensland public agencies and their staff that may be unlawful, unreasonable, unfair, improperly discriminatory or otherwise wrong.

Phone: (07) 3005 7000 or 1800 068 908 (Toll Free)

Fax: (07) 3005 7067

Email: ombudsman@ombudsman.qld.gov.au

Postal: GPO Box 3314 Brisbane QLD 4001

Crime and Corruption Commission (CCC)

The CCC investigates both crime and corruption, has oversight of both the police and the public sector, and protects witnesses.

Phone: (07) 3360 606 or 1800 061 611 (Toll Free)

Fax: (07) 3360 6333

Email: mailbox@ccc.qld.gov.au

Postal: GPO Box 3123 Brisbane QLD 4001

Online Contact Form: <http://www.ccc.qld.gov.au/about-the-ccc/contact-form>

Queensland Civil & Administrative Tribunal (QCAT)

QCAT is an independent tribunal. They actively resolve disputes in a way that is fair, just, accessible, quick and inexpensive.

Phone: 1300 753 228 (Toll Free)

Fax: (07) 3221 9156

Email: enquiries@qcat.qld.gov.au

Postal: GPO Box 3123 Brisbane QLD 4001

Office of the Information Privacy Commissioner Queensland (OIC)

The OIC is Queensland's independent statutory body established under the *Right to Information Act 2009* (Qld) and the *Information Privacy Act 2009* to promote access to government-held information, and to protect people's personal information held by the public sector.

Phone: (07) 3234 7373

Fax: (07) 3405 1122

Email: enquiries@oic.qld.gov.au

Postal: PO Box 10143 Adelaide Street Brisbane QLD 4000



Etheridge Shire
Council

Complaint Form

42 St George Street, Georgetown Qld 4871
Phone: (07) 40799090 Fax: (07) 40621265
info@etheridge.qld.gov.com.au

Please note: this form should ONLY be used to lodge a complaint and NOT a request for service

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Etheridge Shire Council is collecting your personal information for the purposes of assessing your complaint and to ensure that Council is able to remain in contact with you regarding the status of your complaint. Your personal information will only be accessed by employees and or Councillors of Etheridge Shire Council. Some of this information may be given to an external investigator for the purposes of investigation, the person complained about where the rules of natural justice requires, the Queensland Ombudsman in the event that a review of Council's decision is requested, Council's solicitor or insurance broker and or underwriter where legal or insurance advice is required, the Crime & Corruption Commission and Queensland Police Service in the event that the matter involves criminal conduct or official misconduct and other authorised government agencies as required to process your complaint. Subject to the above disclosures, your personal information will not be given to any other agency unless you have given us permission or we are authorised or required by law to do so.

SECTION A Customer Details

Title: Mr. Mrs. Ms. Miss. Other

Surname: _____ First Name: _____

SECTION B Contact Details

Address: _____

Suburb: _____ Postcode: _____

Phone (h): _____ Phone (w): _____

Phone (m): _____ Fax: _____

Email Address: _____

Preferred Contact Method: Telephone Mobile Letter Email

SECTION C Complaint Details

Have you previously lodged a complaint with Council regarding this matter? Yes No

IF YES, what date was the complaint made: _____ / _____ / _____

Have you been notified of progress, or the outcome? Yes No

IF NO, have you previously lodged details of your complaint with any other agency authority? Yes No

IF YES, to whom: _____

When did it happen? _____

Where did it happen? _____

Who was involved? _____

Please provide details of your complaint below. Any relevant supporting information which may be of assistance when assessing your complaint should also be attached.

Please include details such as grounds of the complaint (why the action/decision was wrong), and any detriment suffered (how you were effected).