



Shetland
Islands Council

COMMUNICATIONS

CUSTOMER CARE GUIDELINES

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Service Delivery Policy: Guidelines for staff

Every one who works for Shetland Islands Council is an essential part of ensuring that the Council delivers the best quality of service possible. This means that anyone that you come in to contact with as part of your day to day work, whether a member of the public, a client or a colleague must be treated fairly and with respect, courtesy and professionalism.

These guidelines outline the standards of behaviour expected by Shetland Islands Council when dealing with others, either within or out with the Council.

There are various ways of communicating with our customers and the following are guidelines to assist you in providing good Customer Care at all times. These Customer Care Guidelines encompass:

- Efficient, effective and welcoming reception areas;
- Face-to-face contact;
- Telephone contact;
- Written communication;
- Consultation; and
- Dealing with the media, including writing press releases.

There are also detailed guides to Corporate Styles and Standards and Consultation available on the Councils Intranet or from Organisational Development.

Quality Service Delivery is:

- ✓ treating all people in the same way that you yourself would wish to be treated;
- ✓ answering queries promptly and courteously, whether in person, by telephone or letter;
- ✓ being sympathetic, helpful and friendly;
- ✓ providing accurate information and clear explanation; and
- ✓ being professional and positive by dealing with people that makes it clear you put them first.

Before you deal with a service user, ask yourself – how would I want to be treated in this situation? Other service users are no different from you in that they expect to be treated as individuals who matter.

Quality Service Delivery isn't:

- ✗ merely a set of rules
- ✗ just for senior staff;
- ✗ just for receptionists and those on the frontline.

It is important to remember that **YOU are Shetland Islands Council** to everyone who has dealings with the Council, both within other departments

and to the public. Every time you answer the telephone, make a call, write a letter or meet with someone, you are dealing with a customer.

Our Service Users are:

- ✓ anyone to whom we provide a service;
- ✓ members of the public;
- ✓ outside organisations and agencies; and
- ✓ colleagues.

Some people find dealing with a large organisation like the Council intimidating and confusing. It's our job to make it as easy as possible for people to deal with us.

Other people may not always understand the way the Council or your department works so don't expect them to. It is our responsibility to ensure that we can provide help and information to our customers.

When dealing with Service Users Council staff will:

- ✓ respond to queries promptly;
- ✓ respond to complaints promptly and view them as an opportunity to improve the standard and quality of service provision;
- ✓ be friendly and willing to help;
- ✓ be aware of who can help if we cannot;
- ✓ give clear and accurate information;
- ✓ welcome their views, comments and suggestions;
- ✓ listen to and try to understand the particular needs of each customer;
- ✓ be fair and courteous;
- ✓ act with honesty and integrity and respect confidentiality;
- ✓ let them know what action is being taken on matters that concern them and by whom;
- ✓ keep them informed of progress.

When dealing with Service Users, Council staff will not:

- make them feel as if they are a nuisance or an intrusion;
- make them feel as if their comments don't matter;
- interrupt them or cut them short;
- jump to conclusions;
- be defensive, angry or uncooperative.

Remember: Some people find dealing with a large organisation like the SIC intimidating. That's our problem – not theirs. It's our job to make it easy for people to deal with us.

Customers will not always understand the way the Council works so don't expect them to. It is our responsibility to ensure that we know how the Council works so that we can provide help and information to our customers.

Guidelines for Efficient, Effective and Welcoming Reception Areas

Reception staff are often the first point of contact between customers and the Council. Therefore it is essential that reception staff are trained in how to deal with the public to ensure that customers' first impression of the Council is a good one. The guidelines for face-to-face contact and telephone contact will be particularly relevant to reception staff.

However, it is not enough to have customer-focused staff. No matter how good the staff are at customer service, the service may still be seen as poor if the reception area is not customer friendly. It is therefore important to make Council reception areas as accessible, comfortable, functional, resourceful and welcoming as possible.

Wherever Possible Reception Areas should:

- ✓ be easily accessible to customers, taking into consideration customers without their own transport;
- ✓ have full disabled access;
- ✓ have adequate parking spaces nearby, including disabled spaces;
- ✓ be clearly signed;
- ✓ be open at times convenient for the public (i.e. do not close at lunchtime) and have a clear statement of opening hours;
- ✓ be clean, comfortable, well-lit and free from drafts;
- ✓ an indication of how customers can request any information provided in large print or translation;
- ✓ be free of barriers (except where necessary for security purposes); and
- ✓ have a private room should customers wish to discuss matters in private.
- ✓ Have somewhere comfortable for people to wait

Reception Resources should include:

- ✓ readily available, up-to-date and comprehensive lists of staff, their areas of responsibility and their contact details, including details of newly appointed employees;
- ✓ a payphone or separate extension for public use;
- ✓ writing materials for note taking;
- ✓ adequate and readily available supplies of all relevant forms, leaflets, booklets, etc;
- ✓ prominently displayed comments, complaints and suggestion leaflets/feedback forms;

- ✓ an indication of how customers can request any information provided in large print or translation;
- ✓ a selection of reading material, which is up-to-date and gives information about the Council, its services, service news and items of local interest; and
- ✓ refreshments (tea, coffee, biscuits) for customers who may have to wait.

Guidelines for Face-to-Face Contact

It is important for all staff to be aware of how to communicate effectively with customers in person. Many of the guidelines for face-to-face contact can also be applied to telephone and written contact.

When meeting people in person, you must:

- ✓ be friendly, welcoming, courteous, polite and professional;
- ✓ be smart in appearance and smile;
- ✓ identify customers' needs promptly and clearly, including whether a translator will be required;
- ✓ provide an explanation and try to offer an alternative if you cannot provide what the customer is asking for;
- ✓ watch out for customers' feelings and needs by observing their behaviour, tone of voice and through sensitive questioning;
- ✓ always adapt your own behaviour to the perceived needs and feelings of the customer;
- ✓ acknowledge waiting customers if a queue forms and apologise for any delays in dealing with them;
- ✓ apologise to a personal caller if the telephone rings, answer the telephone and take the callers details arranging to call back;
- ✓ deal with difficult circumstances (e.g. complaints, harassment, time wasters) in a sensitive, polite and understanding way, without causing distress or embarrassment to the customer;
- ✓ say goodbye to the customer and thank them for calling when they leave.

When meeting people in person, you must not:

- ✗ interrupt customers when they are speaking (unless they require clarification or additional information, which shows you are being attentive);
- ✗ show boredom or impatience;
- ✗ tell a customer what you think they want to hear or raise their expectations by giving inaccurate information;
- ✗ make assumptions about a customer;
- ✗ shout or talk in an aggressive manner;
- ✗ continue with other tasks while dealing with a customer – it gives them the message that they are unimportant or a nuisance;
- ✗ ignore a ringing phone, even when dealing with a personal caller;

- x use Council jargon; or
- x treat customers with communication difficulties as if they are stupid.

Guidelines for Telephone Contact

The telephone still provides a quick and efficient method of communication, but only if used properly. Bad telephone manners will create a bad first impression and will reflect badly on the Council. It is important to have a standard telephone answering style to ensure that customers know immediately which service they have reached and who they are talking to. The following guidelines will encourage best practice by staff when using the telephone.

When taking calls you must:

- ✓ answer the telephone promptly (ideally within 5 rings or 10 seconds);
- ✓ introduce yourself and your service area;
- ✓ speak clearly and maintain a friendly, helpful manner;
- ✓ ensure you have easy access to a database of staff contacts and their duties and responsibilities;
- ✓ ensure you have easy access to a telephone directory so you can provide callers with the number they require if the Council cannot help;
- ✓ keep necessary message taking materials close to hand;
- ✓ apologise if the caller is complaining and ensure them you will investigate (see Complaints procedure)
- ✓ seek permission from the caller if you require to put them on hold;
- ✓ take the caller's details if forwarding a call to ensure you give the correct information to the person you forward the call to, and also to ensure you are forwarding the call to the correct person;
- ✓ be positive, focusing on what you can do to help rather than what you can't;
- ✓ try to deal with the matter and if you can't then make sure someone else does;
- ✓ take a message if the caller is unavailable and no one else can help;
- ✓ ask the caller if they wish to be called back (and arrange a suitable time) or if they would prefer to call back later;
- ✓ provide the caller with the direct number of the member of staff they wish to speak with if they opt to call back later and ensure that the appropriate member of staff is aware that they will be calling and what their query is;
- ✓ recap on agreed action before hanging up to ensure you have understood each other;
- ✓ use pre-printed message forms when taking messages and be sure to clearly record the following:
 - date and time
 - name of caller, position and company/organisation (checking spelling if unsure)
 - telephone number for return calls
 - subject of call / nature of query

- sensitivity/importance of call
- action required
- your name; and

When taking calls you must not:

- ✗ try to cope with some other task or continue a conversation while taking a call;
- ✗ be rude, aggressive or unhelpful;
- ✗ pass the blame or take offence if the caller is complaining;
- ✗ transfer a call without passing on a message or informing the person you are transferring the call to who is on the line and what their query is;
- ✗ transfer a call more than once (wherever possible);
- ✗ ignore a ringing phone;
- ✗ **use an answering machine when staff are available; or**
- ✗ encourage unnecessary personal calls while at work.

Remember to divert your phone if you are not available to take calls and advise another member of staff to take messages for you. It is extremely bad practice to leave a phone unattended for any length of time, as someone trying to get through will not receive a good first impression. Ensure colleagues are aware of where you are and when you will be back so that they can give callers any information they request. Check for messages as soon as you return. Where possible, all calls should be returned within 24 hours or at the pre-arranged time.

When making calls you must:

- ✓ ensure that you are fully aware of how to operate the equipment;
- ✓ ensure you have all necessary information and materials before making the call;
- ✓ know who you are going to speak to and think how you are going to word your enquiry;
- ✓ ensure you dial the correct code and number using the internal network where available;
- ✓ be polite, introduce yourself, your service area and make it clear what the call is about/ who you wish to speak to;
- ✓ check if it is a convenient time for the person you have called to speak;
- ✓ arrange a suitable time if it is not convenient;
- ✓ call back as soon as possible if you get cut off; and
- ✓ recap on agreed action before you hang up to ensure that you have understood each other.

When making calls you must not:

- ✗ make a call without some preparation;
- ✗ speak too fast or too slow;

- ✘ continue a conversation which you started with a colleague while the number is ringing;
- ✘ be demanding or aggressive;
- ✘ be rude even if they are rude to you;
- ✘ hang up in disgust or frustration;
- ✘ get annoyed if you get a wrong number – it is not the other person's fault;

It is important to remember that your telephone manner is a key part of the Council's image. Since the phone does not convey smiles, shrugs, nods and general facial expressions and body language, you must express yourself clearly in speech. You should however smile where appropriate because although it can't be seen it can be heard in your tone.

A telephone call can sometimes appear more friendly and reassuring than a formal letter, particularly if the customer is expressing a problem or worry they have. It is important to ask customers if they are happy with the outcome of the telephone call or if they would also like a written response.

Guidelines for Written Communication

All written communication has an impact and creates an impression. The Council's Corporate Style was designed to help Council employees adopt a common approach which in turn will help them to communicate effectively and consistently on behalf of the Council. In addition to adhering to the corporate style, the following things should be considered when communicating by writing.

Letters should:

- ✓ be dated (19 September 2002, not 19th September or 19.09.02);
- ✓ begin with "Thank you for your letter of [date]" if in response to a letter;
- ✓ include contact details (name, extension number, email);
- ✓ be written in plain language;
- ✓ be clear and concise;
- ✓ be polite, friendly and helpful in tone;
- ✓ be written in a warm, personal and conversational manner;
- ✓ use short words rather than long words wherever possible;
- ✓ contain only relevant and necessary information that will be of interest and of use to the reader;
- ✓ be signed by the member of staff who has written the letter wherever possible;
- ✓ be organised and presented in a logical manner that flows well and makes sense;
 - using headings to separate sections if there is a lot of information
 - using numbered paragraphs if a list of points is being made
 - simplifying complex information by use of bullet points and dashes
- ✓ make the purpose of the letter clear at the beginning;

- ✓ use active verbs rather than passive (e.g. 'I passed on the message' rather than 'the message was passed on by me');
- ✓ consider whether the letter should be written in large print, or whether this service could be offered
- ✓ consider whether the letter should be translated, or that this service could be offered and
- ✓ carefully proof-read and check for spelling, typing, punctuation and grammatical errors (although spell-checks are useful they should not be relied upon, as some mistakes will go unnoticed, e.g. 'and' instead of 'an', 'on' instead of 'in');

Letters should not:

- ✗ use jargon, technical terms, acronyms or abbreviations*;
- ✗ be difficult to read or understand;
- ✗ be aggressive, accusatory or unhelpful in tone;
- ✗ be inconsistent in the way information is presented throughout;
- ✗ 'waffle' providing irrelevant information and unnecessary repetitions;

*Where it is necessary or helpful to use technical terms, acronyms or abbreviations these should be fully explained at the beginning of the letter, e.g. Executive Management Team (EMT).

Letter response times:

- ✓ letters should be acknowledged within 3 working days of receipt;
- ✓ if a telephone contact is included in the letter you may wish to respond by telephone (this is often more friendly and reassuring than a letter);
- ✓ any arrangements agreed by telephone contact should be confirmed in writing within 3 working days;
- ✓ full responses to letters should be given within 10 working days;
- ✓ where it is not possible to respond within 10 working days, a holding letter stating when a full response can be expected should be sent out within 10 working days and the customer should be kept updated regularly of process;

Responding to letters quickly indicates efficiency and good customer service. It is good for the Council's reputation and promotes the Council as a caring and competent organisation.

Guidelines for Consultation

Consultation is an important tool for communicating with our customers, measuring what their needs and expectations are, and how we are doing at meeting them. We use consultation to seek views on an issue to ensure that later decisions are better informed and take the opinions of interested parties into consideration. We do not consult to inform our customers of a decision that has already been made or to persuade them of the merits of such a decision.

Consultation helps us to:

- ✓ find out what is important to our customers;
- ✓ plan services and set service standards to meet our customers' needs, wants, and expectations;
- ✓ monitor the effectiveness of our services;
- ✓ ask for feedback (comments, complaints, suggestions); and
- ✓ build trusting relationships with our customers.

Before consultation we must:

- ✓ identify the target audience with whom we wish/require to consult;
- ✓ decide which consultation technique is most suitable for the circumstances and will provide additional options, opinions and information to those responsible for decision making;
- ✓ ensure that adequate time is allowed for consultation and that convenient opportunities to participate are available to everyone;
- ✓ ensure that all members of the target audience are aware of the opportunity to participate in the consultation exercise;
- ✓ consider combined consultation with partnership agencies when consulting on a joint project and when there is a shared need for information, to avoid the same target audience having to respond to a series of consultation exercises over a short period; and
- ✓ identify and ensure the availability of the resources required for consultation.

During consultation we must:

- ✓ consider the special needs of the target audience and make the arrangements necessary to meet those needs;
- ✓ consider the form of the meeting to ensure that those less confident about speaking in public have the opportunity to be heard;
- ✓ allow flexibility by receiving telephone and written comment;
- ✓ clearly explain how the results of the consultation will be used; and
- ✓ point out that the Council will wish to listen to a wide range of viewpoints and that the final decision is likely to reflect a balance between them.

Following consultation we must:

- ✓ summarise the results of the consultation fairly and transparently*;
- ✓ make the results of the consultation available to all who wish to receive them;
- ✓ provide feedback to participants on how their views have contributed to policy and practice and thank them for their participation;
- ✓ explain the reasons for the final decisions, including the weight given to each viewpoint the reasons why some suggestions may not have been taken forward; and
- ✓ evaluate the results to ensure:
 - objectives were met
 - an appropriate number of stakeholders responded
 - the consultation method was appropriate
 - it was a cost-effective mechanism, in keeping with the scale and value of the topic or service.

*Although consultation should be open and transparent, there are good reasons why some equalities groups might require confidentiality and this should be offered and respected.

Guidelines for dealing with the media

Most media contact will be with members (political decisions), Chief Executive and Executive Directors (executive decisions), and the communications co-ordinator (general enquiries, press releases, etc.). Heads of Service are expected to give statements on matters of interest in their service. Other members of staff should only give statements to the press or answer press queries if they have been authorised to do so.

If you receive a press enquiry you should not issue a statement unless you are authorised to do so and are aware of all the facts. What you should do is make an exact note of the enquiry, the reporter's name, telephone number, organisation and their deadline. You should then either pass the enquiry on to someone who has authorisation to deal with it, or receive authorisation and get back to the reporter.

Press Releases

When preparing to write press releases it is first important to assess whether the item is news worthy and current.

In press releases, you must:

- ✓ identify at the top of the page, that it is a press release;
- ✓ provide a name(s) and contact number(s) of people who will be available to answer calls from the press;
- ✓ be clear, concise and succinct, the release must be no longer than a page of A4;
- ✓ avoid jargon;
- ✓ focus the message you want to get across and target it at the people who will be hearing or reading it;
- ✓ ensure there is a good headline, telling the 'story' in a few concise words which will tempt the person who's reading it to find out more;
- ✓ ensure your message is portraying the Council and/or your service area in a good light;
- ✓ consider using quotes, as long as they are from someone who has a direct involvement in the news being delivered;
- ✓ if the release is to be sent by email, ensure the headline is clear in the subject box;
- ✓ keep an exact note of what you said in case of being misquoted.

Examples of Press Releases, courtesy of BBC Radio Shetland.

Example of a Poor Press Release

FOR RELEASE 12/11/03

Following a significant financial input from local funding bodies, Northern Fishgugs Limited has come up with a series of new products, all of which are designed to help develop the business move forward into the future.

Several products are currently in the pipeline, including an interesting plan to use fish waste in an innovative new fashion, coopting local skill-bases, and falling under the ECs Fish Waste Reduction Plan Edict 2002 I:ii: para 6.

22/10/03

Example of a Good Press Release**NORTHERN FISHGUGS LIMITED**

65 Styoochie Road

Lerwick

6900003

The Perfect Gift for Christmas – Happy Haddock Hoofers!

Northern Fishgugs Limited are launching an innovative new product today – shoes made from fish!

The line of footwear has been developed thanks to a £2 million grant from the Shetland Islands Council's Economic Development Unit, and will create two additional full-time jobs at the Company's state-of-the-art factory in Silwick. The shoes are made from offcuts of saithe, monkfish and haddock which would otherwise head for the local incinerator.

Managing Director Robbie Magnie Willie said today "We're extremely happy with the Happy Haddock Hoofers, which come in a range of designs for men, women and children. Samples have also had a positive response from French fashion house Gay Paree, who're including them in their Spring/Summer designs for 2004. We're also pleased that the new line will lead to a 40% reduction in the amount of fish waste produced by local fish processors – something which can only be good for the local Environment."

Press Notes

The launch of Happy Haddock Hoofers will take place at the Company's factory in Silwick at 2.30 p.m. today. MSP Tavish Scott will be available for interview, along with Managing Director Robbie Magnie Willie at around 3.00p.m. For more details, contact Mr. Willie on 01595 810 3323, or mobile 07744 8110 22583.

Slightly more tricky is knowing how to handle being interviewed by a journalist. You have to be good at thinking on your feet and answering unexpected questions quickly and clearly, particularly in live interviews.

In press interviews, you must:

- ✓ prepare for your interview, ensuring that you know what you want to communicate and that you will be able to do so clearly, confidently and concisely;
- ✓ learn your brief and stick to it – this will help ensure that you always have something to say;
- ✓ try to anticipate awkward questions and how you will answer them;
- ✓ keep your answers as brief as possible, using simple language so that everyone will be able to understand what you are saying;
- ✓ speak clearly and distinctly, slowing your speech down a bit if you are a fast talker; and
- ✓ be sincere and enthusiastic.

In press interviews, you must not:

- ✗ say anything off the record – there is no law to stop an interviewer throwing a confidence back at you live on air;
- ✗ read from notes, as listeners/viewers will be able to tell and it will seem like you do not know what you are talking about and you will not seem credible;
- ✗ allow the interviewer to constantly interrupt you;
- ✗ use jargon or complex language to get your point across;
- ✗ try to fill up silences by continuing talking once you have made your point – that is the responsibility of the interviewer;
- ✗ allow yourself to be sidetracked;
- ✗ allow yourself to be rushed into making a comment you will later regret because it was inaccurate or incomplete;
- ✗ become defensive or unco-operative;
- ✗ lose your temper, as it looks unprofessional and reflects badly on you and the Council; or
- ✗ volunteer irrelevant information