



GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT

8th August 2006.

**GM9 CORRESPONDENCE AND COMPLAINT
HANDLING
FILE: 584**

SUMMARY:

Reporting to Council on outstanding correspondence and complaints for the quarter ending 30 June 2006.



Recommendation six of the Department of Local Government Report – Promoting Better Practice is, "Reports should be provided to Council on a regular basis on council's complaint handling activities so that Councillors receive information about Council's handling of complaints and correspondence". At the June meeting of Council it was resolved: -

- 2 "That the information on councillor requests received and dealt with be included in the quarterly report on the complaints handling system.
1. That a resource usage estimate be included in this report.

In the action plan forwarded to the Department of Local Government it is proposed to report to Council quarterly in August, November, February and May each year. Council's Service Standards require correspondence to be answered within 14 days and for complaints to be handled within 10 days, so the report [Appendix C, Part 1, Part 2](#) outlines correspondence and complaints that exceed those time frames. The resources required to handle councillors requests are being recorded from July and are not included in this report.

The reasons for correspondence not being answered within 14 days were:

General Managers Unit

- Conduct Committee Correspondence not being returned to file until after the enquiries were completed

- Letters opposing Rate increase not answered until the Management Plan was adopted
- Job applicants not replied to until job has been filled

Corporate Services

- Public Liability and other insurance matters, which required assessment and negotiation
- Property rental and terms of lease agreements
- Matters under consideration by Council eg. Caravan Park tenders, Goolawah Reserve management, land identified for proposed sale
- Enquiries/applications for property information eg. Property classification, valuation etc.
- Annual returns required as at 30th June 2006.
- Property management matters requiring inspection and assessment.
- The staff shortages in the Finance Section (Costing and Rates) contributed to many of the terms of correspondence assigned to that Section being outstanding for more than 14 days

Sustainable Development Services

- Of the 1033 responses sent in the period, 89.2% were completed within 14 days
- Of the 200 replies outstanding for more than 14 days at the end of the period:
 - 50 relate to objections to Das that have not been determined
 - 7 relate to environmental studies and plans that have not been determined
 - 19 relate to matters that do not require a written response
 - 30 relate to matters replied to by the determination of the DA to which they relate or in the refund of fees
- Other outstanding correspondence will be investigated to ensure that where possible, replies are forwarded in a timely manner

Shire Services

- A recent review of the correspondence process has revealed a lack of understanding by some staff of the correspondence tracking and filing system. For example:
 - There are numerous instances recorded of agendas and minutes being recorded as outstanding correspondence
 - 23 quotes were received in June for the supply of heavy haulage trucks. Although no reply was necessary these are shown on the report as outstanding for 35 days until the notations were entered on the files.

Staff are currently actively reviewing the list of outstanding correspondence with a view to removing items for which a reply was not required or where a reply is no longer required as the necessary action has been undertaken.

An analysis of the correspondence list also reveals that in many instances correspondence can not be complied with within the specified 14 days for numerous reasons, including:

- Matter needing to be referred to Council meeting or Committee meeting
- Matter requiring comment or approval from a third party eg. Government Department
- Matter requiring comment or feedback from several sections within Council (eg. Event Management application)
- Matter requiring detailed investigation
- Matters requiring services or advice from Council's solicitors

Whilst these matters are usually being pursued, no reply was given until the matter had been resolved or full information was available on which to base a reply. It is proposed that in future for matters likely to take more than 14 days, in the first instance, an acknowledgement letter will be forwarded in the first instance.

The statistics indicate that 995 items of correspondence were dealt with in the 3 month period with approximately 70% replied to within 14 days and 80% within 28 days. Given the issues referred to above and the staff shortages in the Department, although not desirable, it is deemed to be acceptable under the circumstances. It is envisaged that improvements to these statistics will occur during the forthcoming quarter.

The reasons for complaints not being finalised within 10 days were:

Sustainable Development Services

- Of the 20 complaints responded to in the period, 75% were responded to within 10 days
- Of the 5 responses outstanding for more than 10 days at the end of the period, 3 are not complaints about Council service and have been responded to and are under investigation
- It should also be noted that the responsible officers position were vacant for the period with responses referred to other officers in addition to their normal duties

Shire Services

A recent review of the complaint handling process revealed a lack of understanding by staff (both in the office and in the field) of the complaint tracking process. As a result, in many instances, complaints were followed up and work undertaken but often no details were provided back for the complaint to be logged as completed. These complaints would still appear on the system as outstanding when in fact work had been completed. This resulted in

complaints wrongly still being recorded as outstanding at the end of the period when in fact they were complete. Similarly a higher percentage of complaints were in fact attended to within the 10 day period than the 50% recorded in the report.

Recent measures have been taken to ensure tracking of complaints is undertaken in order to more accurately represent both the number of outstanding complaints and the time taken to address these complaints. It is envisaged that statistics reported in the forthcoming quarter will reflect these changes.

REPORT IMPLICATIONS:

- *Environmental*

Nil

- *Social*

Nil

- *Economic (Financial)*

Nil

- *Policy or Statutory*

Nil

RECOMMENDATION:

That the information be noted.

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A V Burgess
GENERAL MANAGER