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Councillor and Staff Interaction Policy

October 2022

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Preface

Positive working relationships between Councillors and staff: a Council's key asset

Positive, professional working relationships between Councillors and staff are a key element of any Council's success. If relationships between Councillors and staff are functioning effectively, the Council is more likely to perform effectively. If these relationships break down, it can lead to dysfunction, create a potential corruption risk¹, and ultimately the Council's performance will suffer.

A good relationship between Councillors and staff is based, in large part, on both having a mutual understanding and respect for each other's roles and responsibilities. These are defined in the *Local Government Act 1993* (the LGA) and the *Model Code of Conduct for Local Councils in NSW* (the Model Code of Conduct).

In broad terms, a Councillor's role is a strategic one. As members of the governing body, Councillors are responsible not only for representing the community, but also for setting the strategic direction of the Council and keeping its performance under review. A comprehensive outline of the role of a Councillor is provided in Part 4 of this Policy.

The role of Council staff, under the leadership of the Chief Executive Officer is to carry out the day-to-day operations of the Council and to implement the decisions, plans, programs and policies adopted by the governing body.

Access to information: the key to the relationship

Councillors need access to information about the Council's strategic position and performance to perform their civic functions effectively. The Chief Executive Officer and staff are responsible for providing Councillors with this information to facilitate the decision-making process.

Given Councillors' role in setting the Council's strategic direction and keeping its performance under review, Councillors are entitled to request information about a range of issues.

However, in requesting information, Councillors should not be seeking to interrogate the minutiae of the Council's operations or to direct or influence staff in the performance of their duties. Councillor should also recognise that a Council's resources are finite, and they need to be mindful of the impact of their requests.

Above all, interactions between Councillors and staff should be positive, respectful and professional.

¹ As highlighted by the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption's Operation Dasha
<https://www.icac.nsw.gov.au>

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Official capacity versus private capacity

It is also inevitable that Councillors and Council staff will engage with their Council in their private capacity. This can be for something as simple as borrowing a book from a Council library, to more complex matters, such as submitting a development application.

In these circumstances, it is vital that Councillors and Council staff do not seek to use, or appear to use, their position within Council to obtain a private benefit. To do so could be seen as an attempt to exert pressure on Councillors and/or Council staff with a view to obtaining preferential treatment. Such conduct has the potential to undermine both the integrity of a Council's decision-making processes, as well as the community's confidence in Council, and so must be avoided.

The intent of this Policy

As its core, the Policy has three main goals:-

- to establish a framework by which Councillors can access the information they need to perform their civic functions;
- to promote positive and respectful interactions between Councillors and staff; and
- to advise where concerns can be directed if there is a breakdown in the relationship between Councillors and staff.

Enforcement

Clause 3.1(b) of the Model Code of Conduct provides that Council officials must not conduct themselves in a manner that is contrary to a Council's policies. If adopted by a Council, a breach of the Policy may also constitute a breach of Council's Code of Conduct.

Concerns or complaints about the administration of a Council's Councillor request system should be raised with the Chief Executive Officer (or the Mayor in the case of a complaint about the Chief Executive Officer). If the matter cannot be resolved locally, Councillors may raise their concerns with the OLG.

Important Note – Code of Conduct

The Chief Executive Officer will retain responsibility for enforcing and delegating the decision to provide or refuse to provide information. This will be subject to the decisions of Council and will be in accordance with the Code of Conduct, particularly Part 7 of the Standards of Conduct – Relationship Between Council Officials.

In addition, this Policy governs the interaction of Councillors and Council staff and as such is an enforceable part of the Code of Conduct. Accordingly, complaints regarding breaches of this Policy will be handled in accordance with the Code of Conduct Complaints Procedure.

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Councillor and Staff Interaction Policy

PART 1 – Introduction

- 1.1 The *Councillor and Staff Interaction Policy* (the Policy) provides a framework for Councillors when exercising their civic functions by specifically addressing their ability to interact with, and receive advice from, authorised staff.
- 1.2 The Policy complements and should be read in conjunction with City of Ryde Council's *Code of Conduct* (the Code of Conduct).
- 1.3 The aim of the Policy is to facilitate a positive working relationship between Councillors, as the community's elected representatives, and staff, who are employed to administer the operations of the Council. The Policy provides direction on interactions between Councillors and staff to assist both parties in carrying out their day-to-day duties professionally, ethically and respectfully.
- 1.4 It is important to have an effective working relationship that recognises the important but differing contribution both parties bring to their complementary roles.

PART 2 – Application

- 2.1 This Policy applies to all Councillors and Council staff.
- 2.2 This Policy applies to all interactions between Councillors and staff, whether face-to-face, online (including social media and virtual meeting platforms), by phone, text message or in writing.
- 2.3 This Policy applies whenever interactions between Councillors and staff occur, including inside or outside of work hours, and at both Council and non-Council venues and events.
- 2.4 This Policy does not confer any delegated authority upon any person. All delegations to staff are made by the Chief Executive Officer.
- 2.5 The Code of Conduct provides that Council officials must not conduct themselves in a manner that is contrary to the Council's policies. A breach of this Policy will be a breach of the Code of Conduct.

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PART 3 – Policy Objectives

3.1 The objectives of the Policy are to:-

- (a) establish positive, effective and professional working relationships between Councillors and staff defined by mutual respect and courtesy.
- (b) enable Councillors and staff to work together appropriately and effectively to support each other in their respective roles.
- (c) ensure that Councillors receive advice in an orderly, courteous and appropriate manner to assist them in the performance of their civic duties.
- (d) ensure Councillors have adequate access to information to exercise their statutory roles.
- (e) provide direction on, and guide Councillor interactions with staff for both obtaining information and in general situations.
- (f) maintain transparent decision making and good governance arrangements.
- (g) ensure the reputation of Council is enhanced by Councillors and staff interacting consistently, professionally and positively in their day-to-day duties.
- (h) provide a clear and consistent framework through which breaches of the Policy will be managed in accordance with the Code of Conduct.

PART 4 – Principles, Roles and Responsibilities

- 4.1 Several factors contribute to a good relationship between Councillors and staff. These include goodwill, understanding of roles, communication, protocols and a good understanding of legislative requirements.
- 4.2 The Council's governing body and its administration (being staff within the organisation) must have a clear and sophisticated understanding of their different roles, and the fact that these operate within a hierarchy. The administration is accountable to the Chief Executive Officer, who in turn, is accountable to the Council's governing body.

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- 4.3 Section 232 of the *Local Government Act 1993* (the LGA) states that the role of a Councillor is as follows:-
- (a) to be an active and contributing member of the governing body.
 - (b) to make considered and well-informed decisions as a member of the governing body.
 - (c) to participate in the development of the integrated planning and reporting framework.
 - (d) to represent the collective interests of residents, ratepayers and the local community.
 - (e) to facilitate communication between the local community and the governing body.
 - (f) to uphold and represent accurately the policies and decisions of the governing body.
 - (g) to make all reasonable efforts to acquire and maintain the skills necessary to perform the role of a Councillor.
- 4.4 The administration's role is to advise the governing body, implement Council's decisions and to oversee service delivery.
- 4.5 It is beneficial if the administration recognises the complex political environments in which elected members operate and acknowledge that they work within a system that is based on democratic governance. Councillors similarly need to understand that it is a highly complex task to prepare information and provide quality advice on the very wide range of issues that Council operations cover.

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4.6 Council commits to the following principles to guide interactions between Councillors and staff:-

Principle	Achieved By
Equitable and consistent	Ensuring appropriate, consistent and equitable access to information for all Councillors within established service levels
Considerate and respectful	Councillors and staff working supportively together in the interests of the whole community, based on mutual respect and consideration of their respective positions
Ethical, open and transparent	Ensuring that interactions between Councillors and staff are ethical, open, transparent, honest and display the highest standards of professional conduct
Fit for purpose	Ensuring that the provision of equipment and information to Councillors is done in a way that is suitable, practical and of an appropriate size, scale and cost for a client group of 12 people
Accountable and measurable	Providing support to Councillors in the performance of their role in a way that can be measured, reviewed and improved based on qualitative and quantitative data

4.7 Councillors are members of the Council's governing body, which is responsible for directing and controlling the affairs of the Council in accordance with the LGA. Councillors need to accept that:-

- (a) responses to requests for information from Councillors may take time and consultation to prepare and be approved prior to responding.
- (b) staff are not accountable to them individually.
- (c) they must not direct staff except by giving appropriate direction to the Chief Executive Officer by way of a Council or Committee resolution, or by the Mayor exercising their functions under Section 226 of the LGA.
- (d) they must not, in any public or private forum, direct or influence, or attempt to direct or influence, a member of staff in the exercise of their functions.
- (e) they must not contact a member of staff on Council-related business unless in accordance with this Policy.
- (f) they must not use their position to attempt to receive favourable treatment for themselves or others.

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- 4.8 The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for the efficient and effective day-to-day operation of the Council and for ensuring that the lawful decisions of the Council are implemented without undue delay. Council staff need to understand:-
- (a) they are not accountable to individual Councillors and do not take direction from them. They are accountable to the Chief Executive Officer, who is in turn accountable to the Council's governing body.
 - (b) they should not provide advice to Councillors unless it has been approved by the Chief Executive Officer or a staff member with a delegation to approve advice to Councillors.
 - (c) they must carry out reasonable and lawful directions given by any person having the authority to give such directions in an efficient and effective manner.
 - (d) they must ensure that participation in political activities outside the service of the Council does not interfere with the performance of their official duties.
 - (e) they must provide full and timely information to Councillors sufficient to enable them to exercise their civic functions in accordance with this Policy.

PART 5 – The Councillor Requests System (Councillor HelpDesk)

- 5.1 Councillors have a right to request information provided it is relevant to Councillor's exercise of their civic functions. This right does not extend to matters about which a Councillor is merely curious.
- 5.2 Councillors do not have a right to request information about matters that they are prevented from participating in decision-making on because of a conflict of interest, unless the information is otherwise publicly available.
- 5.3 The Chief Executive Officer may identify Councillor support staff (the Councillor HelpDesk) under this Policy for the management of requests from Councillors.

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- 5.4 Councillors can use the Councillor requests system to:-
- (a) request information or ask questions that relate to the strategic position, performance or operation of the Council.
 - (b) bring concerns that have been raised by members of the public to the attention of staff.
 - (c) Request ICT or other support from the Council administration.
- 5.5 Councillors must, to the best of their knowledge, be specific about what information they are requesting, and make their requests respectfully. Where a Councillor's request lacks specificity, the Chief Executive Officer or staff member authorised to manage the matter is entitled to ask the Councillor to clarify their request and the reason(s) why they are seeking the information.
- 5.6 Staff must make every reasonable effort to assist Councillors with their requests and do so in a respectful manner.
- 5.7 The Chief Executive Officer or the staff member authorised to manage a Councillor request will provide an initial response within five (5) working days. Where a response cannot be provided within that timeframe, the Councillor will be provided with an interim response, and the information will be provided as soon as practicable.
- 5.8 All requests from Councillors to the Councillor requests system are logged and sent to the relevant Council department for a response. All Councillor requests logged in the Councillor requests system are acknowledged within one (1) working day and Councillors are provided with a reference number for each request so that individual requests can be tracked.
- 5.9 If a Councillor would like staff to contact and update a resident directly, they must indicate this in the request.
- 5.10 Councillors are required to treat all information provided by staff appropriately and to observe any confidentiality requirements.
- 5.11 Staff will inform Councillors of any confidentiality requirements for information they provide so Councillors can handle the information appropriately.
- 5.12 Where a Councillor is unsure of confidentiality requirements, they should contact the Chief Executive Officer, or the staff member authorised to manage their request.

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- 5.13 The Chief Executive Officer may refuse access to information requested by a Councillor if:-
- (a) the information is not necessary for the performance of the Councillor’s civic functions, or
 - (b) if responding to the request would, in the Chief Executive Officer’s opinion, result in an unreasonable diversion of staff time and resources, or
 - (c) the Councillor has previously declared a conflict of interest in the matter and removed themselves from decision-making on it, or
 - (d) the Chief Executive Officer is prevented by law from disclosing the information.
- 5.14 Where the Chief Executive Officer refused to provide information requested by a Councillor, they must act reasonably. The Chief Executive Officer must advise a Councillor in writing of their reasons for refusing access to the information requested.
- 5.15 Where a Councillor’s request for information is refused by the Chief Executive Officer on the grounds referred to under Clause 5.13 (a) or (b), the Councillor may instead request the information through a resolution of the Council by way of a Notice of Motion. This Clause does not apply where the Chief Executive Officer refuses a Councillor’s request for information under Clause 5.13 (c) or (d).
- 5.16 Nothing in Clauses 5.13, 5.14 and 5.15 prevents a Councillor from requesting the information in accordance with the *Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009*.
- 5.17 Where a Councillor persistently makes requests for information which, in the Chief Executive Officer’s opinion, result in a significant and unreasonable diversion of staff time and resources the Council may, on the advice of the Chief Executive Officer, resolve to limit the number of requests the Councillor may make.
- 5.18 Councillor requests are state records and must be managed in accordance with the *State Records Act 1998*.
- 5.19 A report will be provided to Council on a monthly basis regarding the performance and efficiency of the Councillor requests system against established key performance indicators.
- 5.20 While it is acknowledged that the procedures relating to the conduct of the Councillor requests system are an operational matter to be determined by the Chief Executive Officer, Councillors will be consulted regarding any proposed changes.

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PART 6 – Access to Council Staff

- 6.1 Councillors may directly contact members of staff that are listed in Schedule 1 of this Policy. The Chief Executive Officer may amend this list at any time and will advise Councillors promptly of any changes.
- 6.2 Councillors can contact staff listed in Schedule 1 about matters that relate to the staff member's area of responsibility.
- 6.3 Councillors should as far as practicable, only contact staff during normal business hours (*Monday to Friday: 8.30am to 5.00pm*).
- 6.4 If Councillors would like to contact a member of staff not listed in Schedule 1, they must receive permission from the Chief Executive Officer.
- 6.5 If a Councillor is unsure which authorised staff member can help with their enquiry, they can contact the Chief Executive Officer or the Councillor HelpDesk who will provide advice about which authorised staff member to contact.
- 6.6 The Chief Executive Officer or a member of the Council's Executive Leadership Team may direct any staff member to contact Councillors to provide specific information or clarification relating to a specific matter.
- 6.7 A Councillor or member of staff must not take advantage of their official position to improperly influence other Councillors or members of staff in the performance of their civic or professional duties for the purposes of securing a private benefit for themselves or for another person. Such conduct should be immediately reported to the Chief Executive Officer or Mayor in the first instance, or alternatively to the Office of Local Government, NSW Ombudsman, or the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption.

PART 7 – Councillor Access to Council Buildings

- 7.1 Councillors are entitled to have access to the Council Chamber, Committee Room, Mayor's Office (subject to availability), Councillors' Rooms and public areas of Council's buildings during normal business hours for meetings. Councillors needing access to these facilities at other times must obtain approval from the Chief Executive Officer.
- 7.2 Councillors must not enter staff-only areas of Council buildings without the approval of the Chief Executive Officer.

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PART 8 – Appropriate and Inappropriate Interactions

8.1 Examples of appropriate interactions between Councillors and staff include, but are not limited to the following:-

- (a) Councillors and Council staff are courteous and display a positive and professional attitude towards one another.
- (b) Council staff ensure that information necessary for Councillors to exercise their civic functions is made equally available to all Councillors, in accordance with this Policy and any other relevant Council policies.
- (c) Council staff record the advice they give to Councillors in the same way they would if it was provided to members of the public.
- (d) Council staff, including Council's Executive Team members, document Councillor requests via the Councillor requests system.
- (e) Council meetings and Councillor Briefings are used to establish positive working relationships and help Councillors to gain an understanding of the complex issues related to their civic duties.
- (f) Councillors and Council staff feel supported when seeking and providing clarification about Council related business.
- (g) Councillors forward requests through the Councillor requests system and staff respond in accordance with the timeframes stipulated in this Policy.

8.2 Examples of inappropriate interactions between Councillors and staff include, but are not limited to the following:-

- (a) Councillors and Council staff conducting themselves in a manner which:-
 - i. is contrary to their duties under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* and their responsibilities under any policies or procedures adopted by the Council to ensure workplace health and safety.
 - ii. constitutes harassment and/or bullying within the meaning of the Code of Conduct, or is unlawfully discriminatory.
- (b) Councillors approaching staff and staff organisations to discuss individual or operational staff matters (other than matters relating to broader workforce policy such as, but not limited to, organisational restructures or outsourcing decisions), grievances, workplace investigations and disciplinary matters.

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- (c) staff approaching Councillors to discuss individual or operational staff matters (other than matters relating to broader workforce policy such as, but not limited to, organisational restructures or outsourcing decisions), grievances, workplace investigations and disciplinary matters.
 - (d) subject to Clause 5.13, staff refusing to give information that is available to other Councillors to a particular Councillor.
 - (e) Councillors who have lodged an application with the Council, discussing the matter with staff in staff-only areas of the Council.
 - (f) Councillors being overbearing or threatening to staff.
 - (g) staff being overbearing or threatening to Councillors.
 - (h) Councillors making personal attacks on staff or engaging in conduct towards staff that would be contrary to the general conduct provisions in Part 3 of the Code of Conduct in public forums including social media.
 - (i) Councillors directing or pressuring staff in the performance of their work, or recommendations they should make.
 - (j) staff providing ad hoc advice to Councillors without recording or documenting the interaction as they would if the advice was provided to a member of the community.
- 8.3 Where a Councillor engages in conduct that, in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer, puts the health, safety or welfare of staff at risk, the Chief Executive Officer may restrict the Councillor’s access to staff.
- 8.4 Any concerns relating to the conduct of staff under this Policy should be raised with the Chief Executive Officer.

PART 9 – Complaints

- 9.1 Complaints about a breach of this Policy should be made to the Chief Executive Officer (if the complaint is about a Councillor or member of Council staff), or the Mayor (if the complaint is about the Chief Executive Officer).
- 9.2 Clause 9.1 does not operate to prevent matters being reported to OLG, the NSW Ombudsman, the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption or any other external agency.

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SCHEDULE 1 – Authorised Staff Contacts for Councillors

1. Clause 6.1 of this Policy provides that Councillors may directly contact members of staff that are listed below. The Chief Executive Officer may amend this list at any time.
2. Councillors can contact staff listed below about matters that relate to the staff member's area of responsibility.
3. Councillors should as far as practicable, only contact staff during normal business hours.
4. If Councillors would like to contact a member of staff not listed below, they must receive permission from the Chief Executive Officer or their delegate.
5. If a Councillor is unsure which authorised staff member can help with their enquiry, they can contact the Chief Executive Officer or the Councillor HelpDesk who will provide advice about which authorised staff member to contact.
6. In some instances, the Chief Executive Officer or a member of the Council's Executive Leadership Team may direct a Council staff member to contact Councillors to provide specific information or clarification relating to a specific matter.

Position
Chief Executive Officer
General Manager – Business and Operations
General Manager – City Shaping
Director – City Shaping
General Counsel
Chief Financial Officer
Executive Manager – People and Business
Executive Manager – City Development
Executive Manager – City Infrastructure
Executive Manager – City Life
Manager – Corporate Governance
Civic Services Manager
Councillor HelpDesk

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