

How to respond to a councillor enquiry - a good practice guide

Professionalism

All of your correspondence, whether in writing, by email or telephone should be appropriately professional. Remember that you are the representative of the council, your service and your team. Bad news is more easily accepted by the recipient if it is delivered in a courteous, sympathetic and professional manner. It is more than “just doing your job” – the people you are corresponding with should be able to see from the tone, layout and language of the communication that you are doing your job well.

Audience

Remember that your audience is the customer, even if the councillor wants the letter sending to themselves. Ensure you write clearly so that your response is clearly understood.

Helpfulness

The customer may not be able to get what they want, but explore alternatives, e.g. the customer doesn't qualify to receive assistance with (a) but (b) may be available if they meet the criteria, direct them to where they can find out more.

Format

- Explain why you are writing: “I have received an enquiry made on your behalf by Councillor...”
- Summarise what the enquiry was: “You have asked us...” etc.
- Respond to all the issues raised, being clear and specific.
- Only use a list if it's the clearest way of providing an answer, or if the customer's enquiry is in list form.
- Apologize where appropriate, including where there has been no actual error - “I am sorry if this has caused you any distress” etc.
- For any future actions, detail who will do what & when, provide contact details for those people/teams if appropriate.
- If you need any further information from the customer to reply fully, give them the most direct method of contacting you, e.g. could they email a smartphone photograph of a letter to you rather than bringing the original in?
- Thank the customer/councillor for their enquiry, even if it was an ill-tempered demand.
- Provide your contact details for any further assistance they have on the particular enquiry.

Accuracy and style

Spelling, grammar and punctuation are important. Your letter should be appropriate to its audience – you can judge the level depending on who you are responding to. Your meaning should be clear without being too “wordy”, but don't use overly long words or technical language unless the context requires it. Try to keep to one sentence = one thought.

Read back everything that you have written. The spelling and grammar checkers on your PC don't know what you mean to say and may offer inappropriate corrections. These tools can help, but are not intended to be relied on completely. If you are unsure which form of a word to use or what the correct punctuation is (particularly apostrophes which are a frequent error if not sure look it up or try re-wording the sentence to avoid the issue. If you are copy/pasting stock paragraphs, make sure that they read correctly in the context of the whole letter.

Examples

Dear Mr Jones

I have received an enquiry on your behalf from Councillor Patel. A copy of this reply has been sent to her.

You have asked us to explain why xxxxxxxxxxxx and requested that we xxxxxxxxxxxx.

I can appreciate why xxxxxxxxxxxx is a concern and apologize for any inconvenience that may have been caused. Having spoken with the xxxxx team, I can confirm that xxxxxxxx. This is because xxxxxxxx.

The work should be completed on xxxxxxxx. I have asked that xxxxxxxxxxxx contacts you by telephone next week to make an appointment with you.

I trust that the above resolves your query. Please contact me if I can be of any further assistance to you in respect of this matter.

Yours sincerely

A Worker

My contact details

Dear Councillor Patel.

Thank you for your enquiry of 1st April on behalf of your constituent, Mr James Jones. I am pleased to enclose a copy of the reply sent to him today.

Please contact me, as below, if I can be of any further assistance to yourself or Mr Jones in respect of this query.

Yours sincerely

A Worker

My contact details

Poor	Try
James'es car, , James' car, Jameses car	James's car
The reason is because	This is because
The repairs team will contact you shortly	Belinda Bloggs from the repairs team will telephone you next week
There is nothing we can do	I am sorry that on this occasion we are unable to assist you
You need to bring in the documents we asked for	We need to see the following documents: A; B; C.