

Access to Information Policy

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to describe the City of Sydney's principles regarding public access to information and the process of managing requests for such access.

Scope

This policy applies to all staff, Councillors and contractors of the City of Sydney (City).

Context

The City holds valuable and diverse information. Some information is recent and some extends back to Sydney's early development.

There is strong public interest in what the City does and the information it holds and the City is committed to making its information available to the community.

Good information is an asset for the City and the community and supports a robust democracy.

The City authorises the release of information under routine business arrangements. The City also authorises, or in some cases is required to, release information under legislation such as the Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979 and the Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009 ('the GIPA Act'). The GIPA Act gives all members of the public a legally enforceable right of access to information created, received and held by Government, including councils.

Principles

The City of Sydney, in providing the public with access to information it holds, is guided by the following principles:

- open and transparent government
- a presumption in favour of disclosure unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure
- equitable access to information, including for people with a disability
- a proactive approach to disclosure and dissemination of information
- timely, equitable and impartial processing of reasonable requests for information within relevant legislative and business frameworks, at the lowest reasonable cost
- respect for the privacy of individuals.

The majority of access requests have no associated costs. All charges that may be incurred are listed in the City's Revenue Policy: Fees and Charges available on our website.

Accessing Information

Any member of the public has a legal right to make application to the City for access to information that the City holds. The City also publishes a wide range of information on its website and makes much information available to members of the public on request.

The City will provide copies of requested information in digital form wherever possible. Where copies cannot be made available in digital form, information may be available for viewing in the Town Hall House reading room.

Under Part 6 of the State Records Act 1998, the City is required to make Access Directions for all records over thirty years old (see [Archives Collection Management Policy](#)). Access directions are made for classes of records, rather than individual records. Records that are open to public access under an access direction must be made available upon request. Records that are closed under the State Records Act can still be requested under the GIPA Act. If access is refused under the GIPA Act, review rights, described below, apply.

Open Access Information and Proactive Disclosure

The City must make its 'open access information' publicly available in accordance with the GIPA Act. Part 3 of the GIPA Act and Schedule 1 of the GIPA Regulation 2009 list the information that is 'open access information'.

The City's 'open access information' is made available to members of the public via the open access information page on the City's website.

Proactive release supports the public's right to information and it demonstrates that the City is actively seeking ways to be transparent and accountable. In compliance with the GIPA Act the City seeks to identify information to disclose proactively and encourages staff to regularly assess whether the information created and collected in their business areas would be useful to publish proactively.

Informal Access to Information

If a member of the public requests access to information that is not available on the City's website, they will be informed about how to make an informal information access request, either through the City's online services, by email or printable form.

The City of Sydney will provide access to information unless there is an overriding public interest against disclosure of the information.

There is no fee required for an informal information access request, but a scanning fee may be payable in accordance with the City's Revenue Policy: Fees and Charges. Information access requests will be processed as soon as practicable, generally within 10 working days.

Formal Access to Information

Where the City refuses access to information in response to an informal information access request the person seeking access to the information will be informed of their right to make a formal access application under section 41 of the GIPA Act.

It may be necessary for a formal access application under section 41 of the GIPA Act to be lodged if:

- the information sought is of a sensitive nature such as described in the City's Sensitive and Security Classified Information Schema
- the processes required to locate the information sought are highly complex
- a large volume of information is sought
- providing access would involve an extensive search
- the information sought involves personal or business information about third parties who must be consulted before the information can be released.

Access applications under section 41 (formal applications) must be in writing and accompanied by a \$30 fee. Depending on the type and amount of information sought, processing charges may also apply. The imposition of processing charges is regulated by the GIPA Act.

A written acknowledgement of the receipt of an access application will be provided within 5 working days.

Access applications will normally be processed within 20 working days. However the decision period may be extended by up to 15 working days where consultation with a third party is required or if records need to be retrieved. A request for an advance deposit may also extend the statutory decision period.

The applicant will be notified of the decision in writing. Any decision to refuse access will include reasons for the decision. If charges are payable, access will be given to the information only once the payment has been received.

Review Rights for Section 41 (formal) Applications

There are a number of review rights under the GIPA Act outlined in Part 5. If access to information is refused as a result of an access application under section 41 of the GIPA Act, the applicant has a number of options available, including seeking a review of the City's decision:

- via an internal review by the City
- by the Information and Privacy Commission (IPC)
- by the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal (NCAT).

Applications for internal review must be made within 20 working days of the notice of the decision being given to the applicant and must be accompanied by a fee of \$40.00.

An internal review will be undertaken by a senior officer who was not involved in making the original decision. A determination from an internal review will be issued within 15 working days. This may be extended by up to 10 working days where there is a need to consult.

Alternatively, an applicant can apply for review directly to the IPC or the NCAT. Applicants have 40 working days from the date the original decision was given to them to ask for this review. If the applicant has already received a review decision from the IPC, they have 20 working days from the date that the decision was given to them to make an application to NCAT.

How Councillors are to request access to information

Part 8 of the City's Code of Conduct addresses Councillors' general rights and responsibilities in relation to accessing council information that is reasonably necessary for exercising the functions of their civic office.

In furthering the principles explained in Part 8 of the Code of Conduct, this section sets out specifically how Councillors are to request access to such council information.

Councillors and their staff should direct all requests for information necessary for the exercise of the functions of their civic office to the Office of the Chief Executive Officer or relevant Director in writing using their official email address or letterhead.

Any such requests received by other business units should be transferred to the Office of the Chief Executive Office or relevant Director upon receipt.

When making a request for information, Councillors and their staff should ensure:

- their requests clearly and concisely describe the information they seek
- the size and scope of requests for information are within reasonable limits.

When dealing with a request by a Councillor for information, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Director must act reasonably. Given that a Councillor may need the information to perform their public duty, if a request is to be denied, reasons for the refusal must be provided in writing. Any information that is given to a particular Councillor in the pursuit of their civic

duties should also be made available to any other Councillor who requests it.

The City's Code of Conduct states that "*Councillors and administrators who have a private interest only in council information have the same rights of access as any member of the public*". Councillors and their staff should make it clear in each request whether the information sought relates to the functions of their position or only to a private interest.

Copyright

The intellectual property of a large amount of City information available for public access belongs to third parties and is the subject of copyright. Plans and reports submitted with development applications are an example. Access to this information is provided to members of the public in accordance with the GIPA Act and other relevant legislation, such as the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979. Copyright laws apply to this information and applicants are advised to seek the consent of the copyright owner before reproducing the information in any way.

Responsibilities

The CEO will delegate responsibilities to staff to determine applications under the GIPA Act, which is reflected in the City's 'Delegations Register from CEO to staff'.

Staff, Councillors and contractors of the City of Sydney are responsible for upholding the principles and processes of this policy as required in their daily work.

The Information Access team provides services in support of this Policy.

Consultation

This updated policy (2021) has been reviewed by Risk and Governance, Legal and the Office of the CEO.

References

Laws and Standards

- Government Information (Public Access) Act 2009
- Government Information (Public Access) Regulation 2009
- State Records Act 1998
- Privacy and Personal Information Protection Act 1998
- Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002
- Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979
- Local Government Act 1993

Policies and Procedures

- Access to Information web page
- Procedure - Access to Information Guideline for City Staff - October 2019
- Informal Information Access Request – pdf and online forms
- Formal section 41 Access Application – pdf and online forms
- Application for Internal Review – pdf and online forms
- Archives Collection Management Policy
- Inclusion Disability Action Plan 2021-2025

Review period

This policy will be reviewed every 4 years.

Approval Status

Council approved this policy on 21 March 2022.

Approval History

Stage	Date	Comment	TRIM Reference
Original Policy	14 February 2011	Approved by Council	2010/267570
Reviewed	Revision draft July 2017	Minor revisions to bring the document up to date and in line with current practice.	2017/277327
Reviewed	Revision draft October 2017	The revised policy was reviewed by ICAC in August 2017 and by Legal and Governance in September 2017 and recommended minor modifications have been incorporated.	2017/637826
Reviewed	21 March 2022	Minor revisions to bring the document up to date and in line with current practice, with focus on how councillors should make requests for information. Council amendments (CM2022/000048) added a principle on equitable access, and the Inclusion Disability Action Plan 2021-2025 to the References table.	2017/637826
Commence Review Date	21 June 2025		
Approval Due Date	21 March 2026		

Ownership and approval

Responsibility	Role
Author	Information Access Manager
Owner	Manager Information Services
Endorser	City of Sydney Executive
Approver	City of Sydney Council