

# Leading With Respect Handguides

**AMO's Handguide 2  
Responding to  
Constituents**

**AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides** provide practical resources, tips, and tools that elected officials and senior staff can adapt, rebrand, and use to foster civility and respect in municipal governance across Ontario.

There are eight guides in the series.

1. An Introduction to AMO's Leading With Respect Handguides
- 2. Responding to Constituents**
3. Chairing Meetings Effectively
4. Holding Public Meetings
5. Fostering Civility at the Council Table
6. Using Social Media and Online Platforms
7. Self-Care for Municipal Leaders and Staff
8. Professional Development and Education

The handguides were developed by MASS LBP and AMO in a joint initiative of the Healthy Democracy Project and Municipal Workforce Development Project.

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## 2.0 Responding to Constituents

Responding to constituents is one of the most demanding and consequential parts of municipal work. Most interactions take place outside formal meetings, through emails, calls, social media, and informal encounters, where expectations are often unstated and pressure can accumulate quickly. How these routine exchanges are handled shapes public trust and sets the tone for civic engagement.

These interactions matter because escalation rarely begins with a single hostile moment. Conflict typically develops when residents feel uncertain, unheard, or unclear about what will happen next.

Without consistent approaches to communication and boundaries, frustration can harden into incivility or harassment, placing strain on staff, elected officials, and the institution as a whole.

This section focuses on practical ways to reduce escalation while maintaining accessibility and fairness. It outlines core principles for constituent engagement, guidance for setting boundaries when behaviour becomes problematic, sample response language to support consistency, and foundational policies that provide administrative protection. Used together, these tools can help your municipal offices manage constituent interactions tactfully and foster a culture of civility.

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## 2.1 Core Principles That Reduce Escalation

Escalation rarely begins with a single moment. It usually develops through routine interactions where expectations are unclear or boundaries are tested. Below are core principles for constituent engagement that can prevent, diffuse, and de-escalate conflict.

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### **Acknowledgement Matters More Than Speed**

In most cases, fast acknowledgement reduces repeat contact more effectively than fast resolution. The constituent's first concern is often not the outcome, but whether anyone is listening.

A predictable acknowledgement reassures residents and prevents inbox-clogging follow-ups that increase frustration on both sides.

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### **Predictable Timelines Are Safer Than Optimistic Ones**

Escalation often begins when expectations float. Offices are safest when timelines are boring, standard, and consistently applied.

If you cannot meet your stated timeframe, set a new one before the old one expires. This keeps the relationship anchored in rules rather than emotions.

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## Helping Is Not the Same as Owning

Your office adds value by navigating systems, clarifying processes, and advocating where appropriate. It becomes vulnerable when it quietly becomes the default operator for every service request.

Routing operational matters to the correct department—while closing the loop—protects staff time and prevents dependency that can later turn into resentment.

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## Jurisdictional Clarity Is a Form of Service

Residents do not always know which order of government is responsible, especially in moments of stress. Explaining jurisdiction clearly, and directing them to the correct office, is not a brush-off—it is an act of respect. What matters is not just transfer, but explanation.

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## A Clear “No” Preserves Trust Better Than Ambiguity

People can live with “no.” They struggle with shifting rationales, vague answers, or the feeling they were managed rather than answered.

### A defensible “no”

- Explains constraints (legal, budgetary, policy, jurisdictional).
- Avoids lectures or moralizing.
- Is paired with the best available next step, even if limited.

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## 2.2 Guidance For Setting Boundaries

Boundary-setting is not about refusing service. It is about creating the conditions that make service possible.

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### Name the Condition for Continuing

When communication becomes abusive or hostile, address the behaviour directly:

1. Identify the behaviour.
2. State the condition for continuing (professional language).
3. State the consequence if it continues.

This should be brief, factual, and calm.

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### Time-Box Where Necessary

For demanding or repetitive interactions, time-boxing (allotting a fixed maximum amount of time for something) protects staff without appearing punitive:

1. Set meeting durations in advance.
2. Limit interactions to specific questions.
3. Offer one clear next step rather than many options.

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### Do Not Negotiate Boundaries

Explaining or debating boundaries invites further conflict. A useful internal rule is, "We will engage on the issue; we will not engage on abuse."

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### Know When to Stop

Your office is not required to provide unlimited access when contact becomes harassment. Disengagement should be clean: state the decision, the condition for re-engagement, and the appropriate channel for legitimate requests.

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## 2.3 Sample Response Language

Once correspondence has been handled within policy and principle, language matters. Clear, professional responses often prevent future escalation.

### The ABC Rule (+ Empathy)

#### A – Accuracy

→ Do not guess.

#### B – Brevity

→ Avoid unnecessary jargon.

#### C – Clarity

→ Separate issues if needed.

#### E – Empathy

→ Acknowledge inconvenience or stress without conceding fault.

**Pulse Check:** If your message appeared on the front page of the local paper tomorrow, would its tone reflect professionalism and restraint? If not, remove adjectives and stick to the facts.

Below are examples of a few different types of professional but clear emails you can tailor to suit the situation.

#### Holding Reply



"Thank you for contacting me regarding [Issue]. I want to ensure I provide you with accurate information. This matter requires review with [Department]. I will provide an update by [Date]. Thank you for your patience."



## **The “Soft No”**



“I appreciate you raising this concern. After reviewing the matter, we’re unable to proceed with [Request] due to [Reason]. I understand this is disappointing. While we can’t [Action], you may wish to consider [Alternative or Referral].”

## **Jurisdictional Transfer**



“Thank you for writing regarding [Issue]. This matter falls under provincial responsibility. To ensure your concern reaches the appropriate authority, I recommend contacting your MPP at [Contact].”

## **Campaign Response**



“Thank you for contacting me regarding [Issue]. I have received a high volume of correspondence on this issue and have noted your views for consideration when this matter comes before Council.”

## **Boundary Warning**



“I want to assist where I can. However, I cannot engage with correspondence that contains abusive language. If we can keep communication professional, I am happy to continue reviewing the substance of your request.”

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## 2.4 Foundational Policies: The Rules that Protect You

To respond effectively to constituents without exposing yourself to burnout or liability, your practices and those of your staff should be backed by clear policies. These do not need to be complex legal documents; they are simply "rules of engagement" that ensure consistency, fairness, and administrative protection.

Below are four key policy areas to consider adopting. We have drawn these from established government frameworks in Ontario, the United Kingdom, and the United States to show that these are tested, defensible standards.

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### Service Level Standards (The "20-Day" Rule)

**The Concept:** Ambiguity creates anxiety, and anxiety drives repeat emails. A published service standard manages expectations by defining exactly when a resident will receive a reply, and from whom in cases when a staff response is more appropriate.

The UK Cabinet Office establishes a clear benchmark for government departments: a maximum of 20 working days for substantive replies. While you may aim to be faster, adopting a formal policy like this protects you during busy periods.

**The "Holding Reply":** Your policy should authorize the use of "holding replies." As practiced in the UK, if a substantive answer cannot be provided within the standard timeframe, staff must send an interim message explaining the delay and setting a new date. This stops the clock and reassures the constituent.

**Calculation:** The "clock" starts the day after correspondence is received.

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## Vexatious and Unreasonable Behaviour Policy

**The Concept:** You need a formal mechanism to disengage from interactions that consume disproportionate resources without a constructive goal.

It is vital to know that “disengaging” is not a dereliction of duty; it is a standard administrative practice. Tribunals Ontario maintains a policy allowing for the “Summary Dismissal” of complaints under specific conditions. Your office can mirror this language to define when you will stop engaging. According to Ontario practice, a matter may be dismissed if it is:

**Frivolous or Vexatious:** The complaint has no serious purpose or is intended purely to cause annoyance.

**Made in Bad Faith:** The correspondence is dishonest or has an ulterior motive.

**Abuse of Process:** The resident is using the complaints process to harass staff rather than resolve an issue.

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## Privacy and Confidentiality Policy

**The Concept:** Handling casework involves collecting sensitive personal information. A robust policy protects you from privacy breaches and builds trust.

Following the example of Tribunals Ontario, your policy should state that you cannot process complaints anonymously; a complainant must be willing to disclose their name and connection to the matter.

**Personally Identifying Information:** Your policy should clearly detail that members of council are not considered employees of the municipality and correspondence between a member of council and a constituent is not subject to the stipulations of the Municipal Freedom and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA). However, when this correspondence is forwarded to municipal staff, or included as part of a formal agenda, it does become part of the public record. Your policy should indicate that identifying information will be redacted from the correspondence before it is made publicly available.

**The "Need to Know":** If a constituent implicitly or explicitly expects confidentiality, you should not share their details without their consent unless there is a risk of harm.

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## Campaign and Anonymous Correspondence

**The Concept:** An established policy prevents your office from wasting time chasing "ghosts" or responding manually to bots.

National Center for Principled Leadership & Research Ethics (NCPRE, USA) guidance suggests that while anonymous complaints should not be ignored if they reveal a serious risk, they generally do not trigger a direct response or serious decision-making process without independent verification.

**Batched Responses:** For mass email campaigns (form letters), the UK Cabinet Office advises against individual replies. Your policy should allow for a "batched response". You may issue a single standard reply to all identical messages or post a position statement on your website to address the campaign collectively.

**Governance Tip:** These policies act as a shield. When you block an abusive emailer, you are not being "undemocratic"—you are applying the Tribunals Ontario standard for Summary Dismissal. When you send a holding reply rather than an immediate answer, you are following the UK Cabinet Office protocol for accuracy. These are not personal choices; they are professional standards.

# Learn More

Organization	Links
Ontario Ombudsman <u>What the public can expect when filing a complaint about an Ontario government or public service</u>	<a href="http://ombudsman.on.ca">ombudsman.on.ca</a>
Tribunals Ontario <u>Complaints policy and Process</u>	<a href="http://tribunalsontario.ca">tribunalsontario.ca</a>
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign National Centre for Principle Leadership & Research Ethics <u>Approach to managing complaints from External Constituents</u>	<a href="http://lcpathways.web.illinois.edu">lcpathways.web.illinois.edu</a>
UK Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman <u>Helping constituents use the Ombudsman's service</u>	<a href="http://ombudsman.org.uk">ombudsman.org.uk</a>
UK Parliamentary Health Service Ombudsman <u>Online Complaint Form</u>	<a href="http://ombudsman.org.uk">ombudsman.org.uk</a>
UK Cabinet Office <u>Guide to Handling Correspondence (PDF)</u>	<a href="http://gov.uk">gov.uk</a>
Healthcare Insurance Reciprocal of Canada (HIROC) <u>Responding to Complaints and Concerns: A Letter Writing Guide for Healthcare Providers and Administrators</u>	<a href="http://hiroc.com">hiroc.com</a>
Minnesota Psychological Association <u>A guide for Legislators: communicating with troubled constituents (PDF)</u>	<a href="http://apadivisions.org">apadivisions.org</a>
Ombudsman New South Wales (Australia) <u>Managing unreasonable conduct by a complainant (PDF)</u>	<a href="http://ombo.nsw.gov.au">ombo.nsw.gov.au</a>



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