



A Guide to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Customer Service Principles

Reform Delivery Unit

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1. Introduction

This booklet is designed to provide departments and agencies with help in the implementation of Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Customer Service Principles. It is appreciated that departments and agencies are at different stages in the implementation of service principles and this guidance is intended to give overall direction to those in departments and agencies with responsibility for service standards. Each department and agency must work through the implications of the service principles for their own organisation, taking into account their specific business needs and experience of existing quality frameworks.

2. Context and background

The business of government in Northern Ireland is to deliver the services that our citizens need and rightly expect. These services must balance the requirements of all citizens – including both the taxpayer and user of the service; they must also be responsive to the needs of the user, be flexible and efficiently delivered. In all that we do we must uphold the principles we are respected for – integrity and equality.

Customer service principles provide a practical way to manage performance in a time of reducing resources, and help shape the expectations of the public of government services. Experience indicates that services can be improved and delivered more cost effectively by:

- refocusing services on customers /citizens;
- finding out what customers consider to be critical aspects of government services and service delivery;
- giving managers the flexibility to respond to customer needs; and
- monitoring and analysing performance against realistic goals and standards.

As an integral part of good management, service principles:

- promote partnership in quality customer service;
- provide meaningful information on the content, value and method of service delivery; and
- use performance and client satisfaction information to guide operational decisions to continually improve service standards and actual performance.

In February 2004 the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretaries Group accepted the nine customer service principles and agreed to their implementation in departments. These principles are laid out at Annex A, page 17

3. Planning

The implementation of service principles may or may not involve a project team, but someone must be responsible for the initiative. A Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) must take into consideration:

- scope of the standards;
- timescale;
- methods of implementation;
- communication; and
- roles and responsibilities.



While managers should lead the implementation, all parts of the organisation should be involved in adopting service principles, and in finding solutions to any problems arising as a result of applying the principles.

4. Implementation

Key points to be addressed in implementing Service Principles.

First steps should be:

(i) Assess the current environment.

- Identify your customers;
- identify your services;
- identify current standards/quality frameworks in use across the organisation;
- identify partners, particularly where there is joint service delivery;
- involvement of representative bodies such as Trades Unions; and
- involvement of staff.

(ii) Consult your customers, staff and stakeholders.

- What are the most important features of the service you provide?
- What is your customers' satisfaction level with the service? Collect baseline information on current service levels.
- What changes do your customers need or want?
- What are your customers' expectations?
- What are your responsibilities?
- Outline reciprocal responsibilities and roles.

(iii) Set service standards.

- Establish standards which customers can relate to;
- make standards consistent across an organisation;
- develop high level, generic standards to act as an umbrella for more detailed standards, as appropriate; and
- begin with achievable standards, review them regularly, make appropriate changes and raise the standards, if appropriate.

Your standards should cover the main services you provide. They should focus as much on the quality of the service, and the overall experience for the user as on the more easily assessable measures of activity and process.

Standards should relate to:

- the service provided (for example paying the correct rate of benefit on the due date);
- the way in which you deliver the service (for example the speed with which you answer letters or telephone calls); and
- the quality of the service provided. The quality of your service is critical. For example, a quick reply is no use if the information in it is wrong.

(iv) Empower and train frontline service providers.

- Train and equip staff to help customers and let staff know what is expected of them.

(v) Communicate service standards and report on performance.

- Advise staff and customers of service standards;
- report on performance against standards; and
- report on customers' satisfaction level with the service.

(vi) Develop a clear communications plan and ensure a consistent approach across the public sector.

It is important to recognise that departments and agencies will be doing a lot of this at present. Pull together what you have and don't reinvent the wheel. Ensure there is a consistency in what you are doing, within the department/ agency and across departments/agencies that serve similar customers.

Key questions to ask before implementation

Has there been real consultation with customers (internal and external) to enable them to contribute to the development of the standards?

Have discussions taken place with other departments and/or agencies, where relevant, on cross-departmental issues and the issues satisfactorily resolved from the customers' perspective?

Have appropriate, realistic performance indicators been developed and are arrangements in place for regular monitoring and reporting on these indicators?

Are arrangements in place to provide the appropriate training for staff?

5. Monitoring

Monitoring is the process of keeping track of customer expectations and operational factors and adjusting service delivery as appropriate.

Knowing what customers think of the service should be a priority; it allows departments and agencies to modify policies and take operational decisions that will lead to an improvement in the quality service provided. Monitoring shows customers and staff that the department or agency is serious about assessing customer satisfaction to measure its performance. Data on customer service and satisfaction show staff the results of their efforts and help them focus on the purpose of the organisation.

Departments should review their current internal and external monitoring arrangements to decide which techniques will best capture information about customer satisfaction and suggestions to improve service. It is important to report outcomes, not just inputs. The number of times a phone rings isn't a full measure of service quality. Complex counting systems require resources and can detract from service delivery, customer surveys can tell much more about the organisation.

6. Developing the principles



Publishing service standards

The acid test for departments and agencies is in the standard of services they deliver. Departments and agencies should ensure that published standards reflect their ability to deliver a quality service.

The standards set should be informed by feedback from the citizen on what they need and expect. Each standard should contribute to the organisation's overall goals. Standards should be reviewed and changed as appropriate.

Information should be provided on performance against the standards. In doing this look at existing monitoring arrangements and use what is applicable, you should ensure that the responsibility for monitoring is clearly assigned and is as cost effective and least intrusive as possible. Information on your standards must be easy to understand and written in plain language. You should explain to customers if the standard is a right or a target. Standards which are rights are enforceable through the courts or by other means such as a complaints procedure or independent review, whereas targets are a level of service which you are aiming to provide but which the user cannot always expect to receive. You should include any standards which involve partners and co-providers.

A Guide to Making Information Accessible, containing more detailed advice, will be published by OFMDFM's Equality and Social Needs Division during 2005.

Under the Freedom of Information Act a public authority (in most cases) must respond to a request for information within 20 days. Departments should take account of this when setting targets.

PRINCIPLE
2

Informing the customer

Organisations should ensure that information about their services is accessible in a variety of ways, for example: in published leaflets; on a website; or via the telephone. Information media should be comprehensible, clearly laid out, regularly updated and, where appropriate, should be developed in co-operation with other organisations. Where appropriate you should state the responsibilities of the customer.

PRINCIPLE
3

Your customers have a right to know how you are performing against your standards. You should publish the results of your monitoring in a way that gets to as many of your users as possible, and is easily understood by them.

Service accessibility

Accessibility of services should be considered in terms of both the physical (location of buildings etc.) and social (opening hours, means of communication) environment.

Examples of areas to consider would be:

- Location and standard of buildings.

Public offices should be easily accessible by public transport or road. Access should be clearly signposted and should enable disabled access. Design and layout of public areas should respect the privacy of the customer. Offices should be clean, comfortable and welcoming. Durable and comfortable seating should be provided for those waiting and, if required, a queuing system.

- Social environment.

Opening hours should reflect the needs of the customer and particular attention should be paid to providing a service at peak times. Telephone services should be sufficient to meet the needs of the customer and answering machines should be considered for out of hours calls. Consideration should be given to the appropriate use of e-enabled transactions taking account of the fact that NI departments have committed to the completion of e-Business strategies to achieve the e-government Electronic Service Delivery (ESD) target of 100% of key services delivered electronically by 2005.

Appropriate facilities for people with disabilities and those whose first language is not English should be provided.

PRINCIPLE
4

Consulting with customers

Make use of existing methods of customer consultation and any information gathered as a result of previous consultations. It is important to ensure that services are and remain relevant and responsive to the needs of customers. Consultation is the key to understanding the needs and expectations of individuals and groups.

An essential first step for each department or agency, or business unit within a department, is to identify its own customers and, where necessary, to segment customers according to the types of services provided for them. Segmentation of customers is necessary to focus on the different customer groups and their particular requirements. There may be conflicting requirements between some customer groups that will need to be resolved.

Consultation can be formal or informal.

Formal consultation

- Customer panels;
- surveys;
- comment cards; and
- internet facilities.

Informal consultation

Departments and agencies should also make use of informal mechanisms. The main informal means of gathering feedback from customers is through day-to-day

contact for business. All staff dealing with the public should be encouraged to gather feedback from customers. This needs to be supported by:

- the provision of appropriate training;
- establishment of appropriate supporting structures; and
- ensuring staff have the time to listen and that appropriate channels are in place for staff to feed information to the relevant area.

PRINCIPLE
5

Polite and helpful staff

Customers judge organisations by the experience they have when dealing with staff they come into contact with, whether face to face, by telephone or through correspondence. It is therefore essential to have the right people and people who are properly trained. Building and maintaining relationships is an NICS core competence and departments and agencies should consider customer care training if this is not currently provided.

PRINCIPLE
6

Seeing callers

Performance indicators for personal callers.

- Customers should not wait more than a specified time for initial contact with staff;
- ensure all necessary leaflets/forms are available in public offices; and
- counter staff to wear name badges or identify themselves by name.

PRINCIPLE
7

Answering telephone calls

Performance indicators for telephone callers.

- Calls to be answered within specified time/number of rings;
- standard procedures to be adopted for identifying oneself when answering the telephone;
- ensure that internal telephone directories are kept up to date; and
- callers are dealt with efficiently and helpfully and not passed needlessly to different parts of the organisation.

PRINCIPLE
8

Answering letters, faxes and emails

Performance indicators for written communications.

- Outer time limit to be set for issue of a substantive reply from date of receipt;
- immediate issue of interim response if substantive reply will not be issued within a specified number of days; and
- take account of timescales laid down in the Freedom of Information legislation.

PRINCIPLE
9

Having a complaints procedure

All service delivery organisations are subject to complaints that can relate to the quality of the service itself or the manner in which the service was delivered. In setting up systems to deal with customer dissatisfaction departments and agencies should ensure that all complaints are dealt with objectively in a consistent open and fair manner.

Elements to be included in a complaints system.

- Information on complaints procedures should be readily available to the public at all points of service delivery;
- complaints procedures should be straightforward;
- all complaints should be directed to, and acknowledged by, a named officer;
- appropriate training should be provided to all staff dealing with complaints; and
- complaints should be dealt with as quickly as possible and the customer should be kept informed of progress. This can be done by indicating a specific date for the issue of a substantive response to the complaint. High level research is available on customer perceptions of access to government services in particular areas, can we use this?

Frequently asked questions

- High level research is available on customer perceptions of access to government services in particular areas, can we use this?

Use whatever information is available to you. Ensure that the information is relevant to the service that you provide and not just general customer perception data.

- Should all departments and agencies not have the same targets, for example for responding to correspondence, answering the telephone etc?

Departments and agencies are providing differing services to customers so it may not always be appropriate to have the same targets. However you should ensure that there is consistency within departments and agencies and across departments and agencies that serve similar customers. Customers will expect a similar standard of service from government irrespective of the service being delivered.

- Was the public consulted when developing the principles?

Representative customer groups were consulted when drawing up the principles.

- Should we not carry out a customer consultation exercise centrally rather than having every department and agency carrying out their own?

Central consultation exercises only give general information. What is required to improve service to customers is service specific information.

- We already have our own standards, should we now replace them with these nine principles?

You might already have standards and they will probably not be dissimilar to the nine principles. If there is something in the nine principles which you do not currently take account of, you should consider addressing this, as the nine principles were drawn up from existing best practice.

- Should all correspondence not conform to the 20 day FOI target rather than setting a different standard for non FOI correspondence?

Most departments and agencies already have targets for replying to correspondence which are lower than 20 days. It would not seem reasonable to customers to increase this simply to fall in line with targets for FOI correspondence.

- We already ask our customers what they think of the service we are providing, do we need to do this twice?

If you are already getting information from customers on the service you are providing you do not have to do this again, ensure that the information you are collecting is telling you what you need to know about your standard of service and ensure that the information is used to improve the service delivery.

- Do we develop service standards for the department as a whole or for specific services delivered by the department?

Service standards should be specific to the service being delivered and may vary across departments. Departments should look as a whole at general standards for example in relation to seeing callers, answering telephones and answering correspondence to ensure, as far as possible, that these general standards are consistent.

- Do we have to put in place additional monitoring arrangements for the service principles?

Departments should review their internal and external monitoring arrangements to ensure that they capture information about customer satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. If you are satisfied that existing monitoring arrangements provide this information then there is no need to put in place additional arrangements.

Annex A

The NICS Customer Service Principles

PRINCIPLE
1

Publishing service standards

Each organisation will publish a set of customer service standards setting out the level of service its customers can expect. The standards should be challenging, relevant, measurable and meaningful and should be publicised widely. Each organisation's performance against the standards should be made available to customers.

PRINCIPLE
2

Informing the customer

Each organisation will provide clear and straightforward information about its services and those of related service providers in a variety of ways, including the Internet. The information will include a telephone enquiry number, textphone numbers and email addresses and should be timely, updated regularly, easily accessible, professional and in plain language. Where organisations require particular actions or information from customers or otherwise consider customers have certain responsibilities, they should explicitly state this.

PRINCIPLE
3

Service accessibility

Each organisation will make its services accessible to its customers by doing everything reasonably possible to make its services available to everyone including people with special needs and those whose first language is not English. Where it is necessary for customers to attend public service offices organisations should ensure that their premises are clean, comfortable and welcoming.

PRINCIPLE
4

Consulting with customers

Each organisation will consult with and will involve customers and potential customers about how its services will be delivered, the quality of service they have experienced and their level of expectation. They will consult in a variety of ways and use their views to improve the services provided. The results of consultation should be reported to customers together with plans for service improvement.

PRINCIPLE
5

Polite and helpful staff

Each organisation will ensure that staff are polite and helpful and that appropriate training in customer care is provided when dealing directly with customers. Staff must be identifiable and the wearing of name badges where appropriate should be encouraged.

PRINCIPLE
6

Seeing callers

Each organisation will ensure that callers are seen without undue delay by setting a target for seeing callers with and without appointments. Callers should be informed of any likely delays. Procedures should be put in place to ensure that queuing systems are fair and flexible and that, where appropriate, waiting time information is provided.

PRINCIPLE
7

Answering telephone calls

Each organisation will ensure that telephone calls are answered quickly. The name of the organisation and that of the person answering the call should be given and the person answering the call should be able to deal with the enquiry or arrange direct contact with an appropriate person who can.

PRINCIPLE
8

Answering letters, faxes and emails

Each organisation will set targets for ensuring that letters, faxes and emails are answered quickly and clearly. Responses will include the name and address of the organisation and contact details. Unless a full and complete response is likely to be made within 10 working days, an acknowledgement should be sent within two working days which will give a target date for a full response. All correspondence, whether letter, fax or email should be clear and presentable.

PRINCIPLE
9

Having a complaints procedure

Each organisation will have a complaints procedure – or procedures – for services provided which should include its policy on redress. They should be publicised through a variety of means, including on the Internet and should be clear and straightforward with an option for independent review. Each organisation will set and report on targets for dealing with complaints.

Annex B

Contact numbers and addresses

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