

# **CPMR Discussion Paper 23**

## **Effective Consultation With The External Customer**

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## Foreword

This paper is the twenty-third in a series undertaken by the Committee for Public Management Research. The Committee is developing a comprehensive programme of research designed to serve the needs of the future developments of the Irish public service. Committee members come from the Departments of Finance, the Environment and Local Government, Health and Children, the Taoiseach, and Public Enterprise, and also from Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and the Institute of Public Administration.

This series aims to prompt discussion and debate on topical issues of particular interest or concern. The papers may outline experience, both national and international, in dealing with a particular issue. Or they may be more conceptual in nature, prompting the development of new ideas on public management issues. They are not intended to set out any official position on the topic under scrutiny. Rather, the intention is to identify current thinking and best practice.

We would very much welcome comments on this paper and on public management research more generally. To ensure that the discussion papers and wider research programme of the Committee for Public Management Research are relevant to managers and staff, we need to hear from you. What do you think of the issues being raised? Are there other topics you would like to see researched?

Research into the problems, solutions and successes of public management processes and the way organisations can best adapt in a changing environment has much to contribute to good management, and is a vital element in the public service renewal process. The Committee for Public Management Research intends to provide a service to people working in public organisations by enhancing the knowledge base on public management issues.

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General information on the activities of the Committee for Public Management Research, including this paper and others in the series, can be found on its world wide web site: [www.irlgov.ie/cpmr](http://www.irlgov.ie/cpmr); information on Institute of Public Administration research in progress can be found at [www.ipa.ie](http://www.ipa.ie).

# **Executive Summary**

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, many countries have embarked upon public service modernisation and development programmes that have sought to alter fundamentally the ways in which citizens are served. These programmes have varied both in their character and pace of change between member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). However, one common feature has been the efforts made by different public administrations, including here in Ireland, to seek the views of its citizens on a more systematic basis in order to improve the quality of services delivered, to reduce the burden of red-tape and to assist in the development of policy initiatives more geared to the needs of those for whom they are intended.

It is within such a setting that this discussion paper focuses specifically on experiences to date and lessons to be learned when public service organisations seek to engage more effectively with their external customers, including not just citizens (who are themselves highly diverse in character) but a wide range of organisations (in the public, private and voluntary sectors), at local, regional, national and international levels. The terms of reference for this study were to:

1. Review and evaluate national/international documentary material, identifying and discussing the key issues to be addressed in order to consult effectively with external customers.
2. Consult with key personnel inside and outside the public service, in order to identify examples of good practice in Ireland and overseas, including innovatory approaches.
3. Explore the implications of different approaches to consultation by public service bodies through in-depth discussions in a selected number of such organisations.
4. Identify and discuss key issues to be addressed by public service bodies to encourage more widespread and effective consultation with external customers.

At the outset, the Committee agreed that the study would focus on consultative mechanisms and systems, as well as good practice.

## **Outline of the paper**

Following a brief introduction, this discussion paper contains six further chapters.

- Chapters Two and Three draw upon current national and international thinking in order to explore some of the important conceptual issues relevant to the effective engagement of public service bodies with the users of their services. Quality-management literature, as well as evidence from cross-national experiences, are drawn upon in order to identify key themes for assessing international and national good practice in this area.
- Chapter Four reviews the overall policy contexts within which Irish public service bodies are currently seeking to engage more effectively with their external customers.
- Chapter Five contains a detailed review of relevant approaches in a number of other countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark and the UK. Specific details of individual initiatives are provided in order to illustrate examples of innovative and effective approaches.
- Chapter Six looks at a variety of current approaches being adopted in Ireland in order to inform current thinking on the key issues and challenges involved in the Irish context, as well as to share examples of good practice.
- Using the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs as a detailed case study, Chapter Seven looks at different approaches that have been adopted to consult with that department's customer base in order to assist in identifying lessons of wider implication for other public service organisations.
- Finally, Chapter Eight draws upon the information and analysis presented in the study in order to discuss appropriate ways forward.

A full list of references is provided and detailed supporting evidence is presented in the notes and annexes.

### **Some key findings**

The research evidence presented in this discussion paper shows that substantial progress has been made, and is being made, by Irish public service organisations in consulting with a diverse range of external customers. Many public service bodies are becoming more proactive and systematic in their approach to external consultation as part of their response to the Quality Customer Service Initiative. Much firmer commitments than before are given in some Customer Action Plans to moving forward in this area. In comparison with the good practice examples identified internationally, however, efforts to engage effectively with the public service's external customers are still at a comparatively early stage in Ireland.

One of the key objectives of this study was to identify and discuss key issues to be addressed by public service bodies to encourage more widespread and effective consultation with external customers. The issues identified by this research can be summarised as follows:

- *Effective consultation involves commitments.* The delivery of effective systems for customer consultation requires a commitment to meaningful dialogue and to decision making and/or action following that consultation. Consultation requires long-term commitment to a process of continuous change and adaptation, not just a one-off event of token value.
- *Consultation needs to be planned.* This involves deciding on what to consult about, when to consult, who to consult and how to consult. It may involve consulting jointly with other bodies. It should certainly be informed by a strategic approach and adopt a mode of consultation appropriate to answering the what, why, when, who and how questions.
- *Potential challenges in relation to effective consultation will need to be identified and managed successfully.* Such managerial challenges can include financial cost. It is also important to ensure effective management and interaction between the political and official domains, as well as recognising and acting to address the equality/diversity dimensions to proposed consultation. The expectations of those being consulted also need to be managed effectively. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointing outcomes no matter how extensive the consultation exercise itself.

Each of these issues is discussed in some detail in the paper and concrete guidance given for public service managers.

Too often in the past, the road to participation has been paved with good intentions only to lead up time consuming and wasteful dead-ends which result in disillusionment and resentment for all concerned. Participation, like democracy, has meant many things to many people. The opportunities for participation are there to be grasped but only if all those involved have a common understanding and share a common language (Wilcox 1994).

Through the Irish Government's QCS Initiative, through the drive for quality management and the increasing use of networks to share experience of successful approaches, there is now much greater scope in the Irish public service for effective consultation with the customers that the service has been established to serve. Organisations may rightly hesitate before embarking upon such consultation for the first time. However, as never before, there is a growing body of experience within the public service, both nationally and internationally, to inform good practice and give practical support to public service managers seeking meaningful consultation to inform effective action. In this regard, this discussion paper should prove helpful.

# 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Preamble

During his period as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (UK), Lord Palmerston is reputed to have said to Queen Victoria, ‘Change? change? Why do we need change? Things are quite bad enough already!’ Fortunately, for public administrations across the world and the citizens they serve, Lord Palmerston’s maxim has not gone unchallenged. Over the past two decades in particular, many countries have embarked upon public service modernisation and development programmes that have sought to alter fundamentally the ways in which citizens are served. These programmes have varied both in their character and pace of change between member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). However, one common feature of these programmes has been the efforts made by different public administrations, including here in Ireland, to seek the views of its citizens on a more systematic basis in order to improve the quality of services delivered, to reduce the burden of red tape and to assist in the development of policy initiatives more geared to the needs of those for whom they are intended. It is within such a setting that this discussion paper focuses specifically on experiences to date and lessons to be learned when public service organisations seek to engage more effectively with their external customers.

### 1.2 Setting the scene

Since its launch in 1994, the key aims of the Irish public service modernisation programme, also referred to as the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI), have been to:

- provide an excellent service to the public
- contribute to national development, and
- make the most efficient and effective use of resources.

Because of its direct relevance to each of these aims, it is therefore not surprising that one of the fundamental objectives of the change agenda identified in *Delivering Better Government* (1996) was the ‘achievement of an excellent service for the Government and for the public as customers and clients at all levels’.

This stated objective of achieving significant improvements in service delivery has been made with equal force at the local government level. ‘Government, including local

government, exists to serve the people. However, in the public service, there is the danger that insufficient attention may be paid to the needs of the customer and that internal demands, preferences and perceptions of the organisation may take precedence. To counteract this, there is a need to establish systems to ensure that those responsible for the delivery of services are driven by the requirements of customer needs and customer satisfaction and that services are viewed from the customers', rather than the organisations', perspective. In this way, government is made more responsive and the customer better served' (*Better Local Government 1996*).

Some of the key management issues and challenges to be addressed in the promotion of a quality customer service (QCS) approach by the Irish public service have been the subject of earlier studies undertaken by the Committee for Public Management Research (CPMR) (see <http://www.irlgov.ie/cpmr>).

### **1.3 Previous research by the CPMR**

Since its establishment in 1997, the CPMR has sought to develop a wide-ranging programme of research to serve the needs of future development in the Irish public service. As an early priority, the Committee initiated a series of studies to inform the development of a Quality Customer Service (QCS) approach in the civil and wider public service. In the first of these studies, it was concluded that, '... with some notable and noteworthy exceptions ... there is still a very long way to go before it can be asserted that Irish public service organisations have taken on board wholeheartedly the need to be customer focused throughout the design, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of the services delivered ... Rarely were customer needs placed centre stage' (Humphreys 1998).

At that time, it was also concluded that, 'it is important to attempt to plot possible ways forward which will encourage rather than discourage those positive tendencies already developing within the Irish public service. It will also be important to facilitate the sharing of experience across the public service of constructive approaches to addressing customer service needs within a realistic management context' (Humphreys 1998). With these objectives in mind, the Committee has to date undertaken two further research studies focusing on QCS issues and directly relevant to public service managers seeking to plot constructive ways forward in the delivery of quality services.

*In CPMR Discussion Paper No. 11*, Humphreys et al (1999) undertook a detailed assessment study of best practice approaches to the mainstreaming of customer service values at national and local government levels. Building upon this earlier work, *CPMR Research Report No. 4* focused upon the critically important issues of accreditation and recognition as potential

drivers of change (Humphreys et al 2001). In particular, by critically evaluating current arrangements and drawing upon best practice both in Ireland and elsewhere, the study provides objective and practical proposals on how best to introduce a QCS Mark in the Irish public service. These proposals are being considered by the Quality Customer Service Working Group, within the wider context of existing accreditation and recognition schemes (see Chapter Four for further details of this Working Group).

Finally, Boyle (1999) examines international practice with regard to regulatory reform and, within this context, identifies some key issues in the areas of consultation and participation that are relevant to this current study (*CPMR Discussion Paper No. 12*). Drawing upon international best practice, Boyle (1999) argues that ‘Mechanisms for consultation and participation should be developed’ because ‘public consultation and participation are powerful means of improving regulatory quality. Consultation and participation ground regulatory review in the reality of those most affected’ (p.39).

#### **1.4 New research challenges**

As will be seen later in Chapter Four, as part of the government’s QCS Initiative commenced in 1997, departments and offices are implementing their *Customer Action Plans* for the period 2001-2004. Following the government decision of 19 July 2000, each of these plans should seek to specifically address a number of new areas including equality/diversity and the internal customer. There is little doubt that these new areas will present considerable challenges to public service managers and research is either currently in hand or planned to help inform their work in seeking to operationalise these new Guiding Principles (see Annex One). These are the studies in question.

1. Under the auspices of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Equality Authority, and on behalf of the Equality/Diversity Sub-Group of the QCS Working Group, research has been completed to explore the particular circumstances, needs and disadvantages faced by the groups covered by the Equal Status legislation, socially and geographically excluded groups and the users of Irish.<sup>1</sup>
2. On behalf of the QCS Working Group, the Department of the Taoiseach has commissioned an independent assessment of the second series of recently produced Customer Action Plans (2001-2004) (see Butler 2002).
3. In addition, the CPMR is currently undertaking research on Developing an Effective Internal Customer Service Ethos in Irish public service organisations, following completion of this current study on effective consultation with the external customer.<sup>2</sup>

In a wide-ranging review of the public service modernisation programme, Boyle and Humphreys (2001) conclude that while ‘There is little doubt that real progress has been made ...with the quality of services delivered to the Irish public ... meaningful engagement with the customer, identification of their needs and the development of delivery systems responsive to those needs remains at an early stage of development’ (*CPMR Discussion Paper No. 17*). Boyle and Humphreys (2001) also stress that ‘... there is a need to move beyond a focus on better customer care. Other administrations, at both central and local government levels, are developing initiatives such as citizens juries and user panels to deepen participation in service design and delivery ... The concept of active citizenship is one which needs to be promoted, and which will pose significant challenges to the public service up to 2010’ (p. 80). New Irish research is needed to explore and advise on effective ways for public service organisations to consult with their external customers.

It is within this context that the current study provides a detailed assessment of relevant national and international developments relating to effective citizen engagement and external consultation. ‘The idea that public sector organisations should consult people about the kinds of services and policies that they want is not new ... But not all public service providers share this enthusiasm: some have been hostile to the idea of consultation, and others have found it difficult to carry out successfully. Effective consultation is not easy to achieve. ... Yet consultation can be a powerful tool for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of services, and for ensuring that policy makers stay in touch with citizens. These benefits can be secured only if consultation is carefully planned, effectively carried out and thoughtfully used’ (Audit Commission 1999, p.5).

## **1.5 New management challenges**

On the basis of CPMR research already undertaken, it is fair to say that, while some Irish departments/offices have an established track record in this area, systematic consultation with the users of public services to provide for effective input to the development of those services can represent a comparatively new set of challenges for many Irish public service bodies and their staff. As a result, undertaking a research study focusing specifically on the management issues and challenges presented by such developments should prove valuable in taking forward the public service modernisation agenda. Such a study is also timely.

The current national pay and partnership agreement, the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF), states that, ‘Enhancing performance is aimed at improving service standards. Improved standards of service follow from a strong focus on the needs of recipients, the setting of challenging standards in service delivery, and making the best use of available resources. In this context, it is essential to provide for consultation with, and feedback from,

both the providers and users of services in order to identify the required improvements and validate the progress being made subsequently in improving service delivery'. This approach is underpinned by the provision under the PPF for a 4 per cent pay increase in 2002, which will be paid in return for implementation of key modernisation objectives, one of which is the 'implementation of challenging service standards set in consultation with the recipients of the service'.

## **1.6 Responding to the external customer**

As the Department of the Taoiseach (2001a) makes clear in its Guidance Notes to Departments/Offices, 'Consultation is the key to understanding the needs and expectations of individuals and groups' (Section 4.2). External customers need to be identified and action taken to ensure that consultation is not a once off event, because expectations and needs are likely to change over time. Meaningful consultation requires commitment to an on-going partnership approach aimed at continuously improving services. In this context, it is important that consultation is not deferred until after the introduction of a service/scheme but instead is part of the development/introduction process. Effective consultation is an integral part of quality management and is therefore not just an urgent issue for the QCS agenda.

The regulatory reform agenda is also vitally important in this regard. Consultation is particularly relevant in establishing the extent to which a department/office's regulatory base is imposing undue burdens on customers and client groups. 'Historically in Ireland, the consumer voice (and in particular, the domestic consumer) has been weak relative to producer interests. This imbalance has often resulted in a higher priority being placed on promoting the interests of producers/providers of particular goods/services rather than those who consume them' (*Towards Better Regulation 2002*). The OECD (2001a) review of Ireland's regulatory regime strongly recommended enhancing consultation mechanisms on proposed regulation. Departments and offices, it suggested, should ensure that new Customer Action Plans capture the potential of business test panels and user groups to improve the quality of the regulatory process. This can include helping to identify areas where streamlining and revision are needed, providing assistance with the formulation of policy responses which are alternatives to new regulation and identifying scope for consolidation.

More recently, the OECD (2001b) has argued that effective engagement with the external customer or citizen has an even more significant role to play. 'Strengthening relations with citizens is a sound investment in better policy making and a core element of good governance. It allows government to tap new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources when making decisions. Equally important, it contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity. Such

efforts help strengthen representative democracy, in which parliaments play a central role' (OECD 2001b, p.1). As Caddy (2001) points out, it is 'not that consultation and participation never happen, they do. But these efforts are too often focused on specific issues where public interest is already high, such as environment or consumer protection, and have not been imitated enough throughout government as an integral part of the whole democratic and law-making process'.

## **1.7 Scope of the study**

While it is primarily the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA), the Office of the Revenue Commissioners (ORC) and the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (DAFRD) that deal with significant numbers of the public on a regular basis,<sup>3</sup> it is important to appreciate, at the outset, that the external customers of the public service include not just citizens (who are themselves highly diverse in character) but a wide range of organisations (in the public, private and voluntary sectors), at local, regional, national and international levels. This approach is consistent with that adopted internationally by organisations such as the OECD. It sees citizens/customers as either individuals or groups (such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), unions, pressure groups etc.), who may become involved in or be impacted by public policies and programmes. For good business reasons, it is vitally important for all public service bodies to ensure that services are, and remain, relevant and responsive to the changing needs of their external customers, whether they are individuals or institutions.

## **1.8 Terms of reference and research approach**

Within this context, the following terms of reference were agreed by the Committee for this study:

1. Review and evaluate national/international documentary material, identifying and discussing the key issues to be addressed in order to consult effectively with external customers.
2. Consult with key personnel inside and outside the public service, in order to identify examples of good practice in Ireland and overseas, including innovatory approaches.
3. Explore the implications of different approaches to consultation by public service bodies through in-depth discussions in a selected number of such organisations.
4. Identify and discuss key issues to be addressed by public service bodies to encourage more widespread and effective consultation with external customers.

Accordingly, the agreed research approach adopted for this study included:

- the review and analysis of available hard-copy and web-sourced documentation;
- in-depth semi-structured interviews with management and other personnel in a small number of individual public service organisations and
- drawing upon each previous element of the research approach, the identification and discussion of key issues.

At the outset, the Committee agreed that the study would focus on consultative mechanisms and systems, as well as good practice.

## **1.9 Structure of the paper**

This discussion paper contains six further chapters.

- Chapters Two and Three draw upon current national and international thinking in order to explore some of the important conceptual issues relevant to the effective engagement of public service bodies with the users of their services. Quality-management literature, as well as evidence from cross-national experiences, are drawn upon in order to identify key themes for assessing international and national good practice in this area.
- Chapter Four reviews the overall policy contexts within which Irish public service bodies are currently seeking to engage more effectively with their external customers.
- Chapter Five contains a detailed review of relevant approaches in a number of other countries, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the UK. Specific details of individual initiatives are provided in order to illustrate examples of innovative and effective approaches.
- Chapter Six looks at a variety of current approaches being adopted in Ireland in order to inform current thinking on the key issues and challenges involved in the Irish context, as well as to share examples of good practice.
- Using the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs as a detailed case study, Chapter Seven looks at different approaches that have been adopted to consult with that department's customer base in order to assist in identifying lessons of wider implication for other public service organisations.
- Finally, Chapter Eight draws upon the information and analysis presented in the study in order to discuss appropriate ways forward.

A full list of references is provided and detailed supporting evidence is presented in the notes and annexes.

## **Establishing An Effective Relationship With The External Customer**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to draw upon contemporary national and international thinking in order to explore some of the important issues relevant to the effective engagement of public service bodies with the users of their services. The research topic is placed within the wider context of developing trends in public service management and the introduction of quality management approaches within organisations. Specific issues relevant to the development of consultation systems and approaches in public service bodies are identified and discussed in some depth. These issues include top-down service delivery, a non-competitive operational environment and balancing competing socio-economic interests. The general arguments in favour of external consultation are then reviewed and some concluding remarks made.

### **2.2 External consultation as part of public service modernisation**

Over the past two decades, the public services of most advanced economies, including OECD member countries, have undergone significant changes in the way in which they conduct their business. This process is often referred to as public management reform, which Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) characterise as ‘deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organisations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better’ (p.8). Often, within the wider setting of such modernisation programmes, significant developments in external consultation have been made by public servants over the past few decades. However, as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) point out in this regard, the claims made by the unquestioning advocates of public management reform have on occasion been excessive. ‘There is a utopian quality to some of the political rhetoric around reforms, particularly in the UK and North America. In Paradise citizens will enjoy services which are high quality yet low cost, easily accessed and responsive. They will become more satisfied with their governments. Meanwhile civil servants will take on a new culture, infused by the values of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and customer service. Citizens will be empowered, civil servants will be trusted by politicians and citizens alike, politicians themselves will provide ‘leadership’ and strategic guidance. If only all this could be bottled!’ (p. 97).

Bogdanor’s comments on the UK experience are also pertinent here. ‘The fundamental leitmotif animating Civil Service reform is that efficiency in the public services can be

achieved by stimulating a business situation by adapting the methods and practices of the private sector to the public services ... If, however, the Civil Service is to be remodelled so that it adopts the methods and practices of business, it is important first that these methods and practices are fully understood ... It is unfortunately all too easy to visualize managers in the private sector as buccaneering entrepreneurs, subject to the stern rigours of competition, and 'incentivized' by means of performance pay. Such a picture, however, corresponds to fantasy rather than reality – most large companies operate not as buccaneers, but as corporate structures very like the traditional Civil Service' (Public Management and Policy Association, 2001)

Since the 1980s, numerous commentators have observed and analysed the international rise of managerialism in the public services (see Pollitt 1993) and the development of new public management (NPM) (see Ferlie et al 1996). Prior to the advent of NPM, it is argued that the traditional model for public administration had been organisationally rigid, culturally bureaucratic and narrowly focused on structure and process (see Hughes 1994). Osborne and Gaebler (1992) capture the unsatisfactory situation that prevailed at that time well, 'The kind of governments that developed during the industrial era, with their sluggish centralised bureaucracies, their pre-occupation with rules and regulations and their hierarchical chains of command, no longer work very well ... Hierarchical, centralised bureaucracies designed in the 1930s and 1940s simply do not function well in the rapidly changing, information-rich, knowledge-intensive society and economy of the 1990s'. Change-driven organisations are all the more imperative in the first decade of the new millennium.

In his international overview of public sector reform, Nolan (2001) identifies four principal models or phases in the development of NPM to date. He argues that, in its most recent manifestation, key ideas and concepts are taken from the private sector and applied in a distinctive public sector context. The key characteristics that he identifies for this fourth and current phase are:

- 'a major concern with service quality (e.g. the use of quality initiatives; the rise of total quality management); a value-driven approach based on a mission to achieve excellence in the public services; and
- reflection of user ... concerns and values in the management process; reliance on user voice rather than customer exit as the characteristic source of feedback; a concept of citizenship'.

In his overview of the past twenty years of public sector modernisation from an OECD perspective, Matheson (2001) notes that 'the consumerist idea has taken deeper root – that citizens should have a say in the services the state provides to them and that some services

should be fashioned for individual circumstances ... Governments have increasingly taken up the techniques of customer research, communication and persuasion developed in marketing and public relations' (pp. 2/3).

Actively seeking and listening to the diverse voice of the users of public services is a real challenge for public service managers in many public administrations. Redefining, re-focusing and (re-) developing services appropriate to the needs of the citizen/customer requires clarity about whose needs are to be met and the assessment of their needs. It requires flexibility and responsiveness to an often rapidly changing environment and balancing identified needs and expectations in order to optimise available resources. As Gaster (1995) points out, quality is not one size fits all. Customer satisfaction relates to how services are actually experienced and how services meet or exceed the expectations of the external customer. In order to avoid the pitfalls of a 'one size fits all' approach, effective external consultation is a valuable potential tool for public service managers and can assist in the effective deployment of finite resources. As Shand and Arnberg (1996) have noted, focusing on quality reinforces the concept of public service ethos. Indeed they go on to assert that the very existence of public sector organisations is premised upon the delivery of a service or product to the public.

The effective engagement with users of public services has potentially significant implications not only for public sector bodies themselves but also for the political domain. 'For too long, the organisation and management of the public sector seem to have taken on a life of their own. A country's citizens were almost after thoughts to the complex network of structures, policies and systems internal to government. However, the reversion to a client focus in government changes substantially the operating environment for both elected officials and public service employees ... Service quality is so much more than saying 'We'll answer the telephone in three rings or fewer'. It is a continuous effort to improve quality in every way possible. That means that as elected officials and as public service employees, we can expect the words 'service' and 'quality' to become virtually interchangeable in our lives. And the public will certainly look upon that as good news' (Eggleton, 1996, pp. 219-223).

### **2.3 External consultation as part of quality-management**

Not only has the trend towards meaningful consultation with the citizen/customer been an integral part of public service modernisation programmes, it has also been an essential element in the quality management movement. As Löffler (2001) points out, 'For a long time, the activity of quality measurement has been considered as a technical problem which just requires getting the measurement process right. However, without meaningful involvement of key stakeholders, discussion of quality indicators and their attendant risks can

become little more than insider conversations, which neither the press nor the citizens or politicians consider worthwhile or take seriously' (see also Bouckaert 1995, Bovaird and Halachmi 1999, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000).

In their review of quality initiatives across the OECD, Shand and Arnberg (1996) found that the thinking behind quality reforms was based in part at least upon, 'resolving an inherent conflict between public servants and citizens in favour of citizens and shifting power from the supplier to the client', 'administrative simplification or de-bureaucratisation', so 'that market mechanisms and client choice must be an integral part of client focus and particularly in local government, that participation in decision making on services must inherently improve the quality of services'. In looking forward, these commentators identify a number of core values for quality public services including: (a) clients participating in, or being consulted about, decisions on what level and type of service are to be provided, (b) clients being informed as to the level and type of services to be provided, and (c) clients having reasonable expectations of receiving this level of service.

In their detailed review of international and national quality accreditation and recognition schemes, Humphreys et al (2001) found that effective consultation with service users was a common feature of many existing international and national schemes (see *CPMR Research Report No. 4*). For example, the major European level quality frameworks such as those adopted by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), the Speyer Quality Award and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) all place emphasis upon the importance of adopting a clear customer focus, including the desirability of citizen consultation. Likewise, ISO 9004:2000 now recognises the importance of meeting the needs and expectations of customers and end-users when seeking to improve performance. Providing a means of expression, as well as actually listening to the voice of the service user, are also common features of initiatives in individual countries (see Chapter Five). As Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) observe, 'modern quality management techniques such as TQM are founded on the centrality of customer requirements, and have been introduced in parts of the Australian, Canadian, Dutch, Finnish, French, New Zealand, Swedish, UK and US public sectors, as well as being promoted by some parts of the European Commission' (p.177) (see Chapter Five).

## **2.4 Some specific public service delivery issues**

As Nolan (2001) has indicated, the move towards greater consultation with service users, for many years a common feature of the commercial sector, is now being more widely adopted in the non-commercial public service. The reasons for this are varied. For example, public service providers often seek to engage more effectively with their external customers as part

of a wider modernisation programme and/or to become more actively involved in quality management. In other cases, individual public service providers have begun to consult with their customers in order to assist them in addressing specific business needs for their organisations.

Whatever the reasons, it is important to acknowledge, within the context of the desirability of effective consultation with the customer, that there can be significant differences between public and private sectors in terms of their operational environments (see Humphreys 1998). As the Cabinet Office (1988) points out

In the private sector, there is a direct relationship between commercial success – as measured by profitability and market share – and the standard of customer service. The public sector is more complicated and in many instances distinctly different. In general, the reasons for providing a service in the first place, the nature of that service and the manner in which it is delivered, are not dictated by markets. In these circumstances, the balance between public expectations and the level of service to be provided is decided on the basis of political judgements about economic and social priorities. All that said, those who execute public service functions have a professional responsibility to do so to the highest standards of service possible, within the given level of resources, and this is what civil servants want to achieve

Given such differences, it is important to explore in more detail some of the specific features of public service organisations because of their implications for effective consultation with the external customer.

#### *2.4.1 Top-down delivery*

Bendell et al (1994) point out that, ‘In public administration it has often been the case that the provision of the service to the public has not been that of a supplier to a customer but rather that of an authority to a subject ... public employees have found themselves primarily as agents of the state carrying out an official state purpose, rather than service personnel involved in the provision of a defined service to a customer’ (p.9). Claver et al (1999) also point out that a citizen-focused approach represents quite a different and contrasting kind of corporate culture to that often found in public administrations, where traditionally the management style is authoritarian; there is little internal or external communication; individuals have little scope for initiative; decision making is centralised and repetitive; and beliefs are conservative and reluctant to change. In such an organisational culture and setting, public servants may be hesitant to adopt a listening role and actively engage in external consultation.

Such values can take time to change. Prior to the reforms that have taken place within local government in the UK, Burns et al. (1994) identified and characterised the relationship between the elected representatives, the officials and the public/voter as one of 'bureaucratic paternalism'. In such circumstances, Burns et al. (1994) conclude that a 'we know best' attitude to the public predominates, as officials and politicians often refer to their shared perception of the public interest, but without meaningful engagement with the public that directly or indirectly appoints them. As a positive response to this unsatisfactory situation, innovative efforts have been made to adapt private sector customer service models to a public service context (see Baddeley and Dawes 1986; Stewart and Clarke 1987). Albeit slowly, greater acceptance is being gained, within many public administrations, for the idea of a more customer driven government, based on an approach which strives to meet the needs of the customer rather than the bureaucracy (see Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

#### *2.4.2 A non-competitive environment*

Public services often operate as monopolies or oligarchies where customers/users have very limited options for going elsewhere. The involuntary and monopolistic character of many public services can be a key factor inhibiting consumer preferences. McKeivitt (1998) argues that, in the public sector, the client usually has no possibility of exit from the relationship with the service provider. This restriction places an even more compelling responsibility on service providers to install responsive and flexible delivery systems in order to give attention to 'citizen-voice'. However, the absence of choice on the side of the service user can also encourage complacency on the side of the service provider. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that monopolistic providers can be vulnerable to the development of a less than virtuous circle of low standards in both the demand for, and supply of, their services. 'The phenomenon of 'excess demand' which leads to queues and rationing decreases the motivation to improve quality in other ways too. If one customer dislikes the service and goes elsewhere (if they can) there is usually another one waiting in the queue. Large scale desertion ('exit') may be unlikely because the public provider occupies a monopolistic or oligopolistic position (there are few if any alternatives to exit to). This restriction on behaviour is, of course, likely to be felt most acutely by low-income consumers. Trapped in a monopolistic system which provides them with essentials such as health care or education or social security benefits, such customers often form very low expectations for service quality. To put it bluntly, they get used to low standards and so do the service providers (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 1995, p. 12-13).

In this context, as Humphreys (1998) has already indicated, there can in practice be real limitations to the meaningful use of the term 'customer' outside a commercial setting, given that most public services are normally delivered free of direct charge by monopolistic providers. Such an attitude in public servants could lead them to question the very need to

consult. The implications of effective engagement with the external customer in a non-commercial public service environment can be very significant for the ways in which the public service conducts its business. As Shand and Arnberg (1996) point out

‘Service quality initiatives ... raise fundamental issues about the relationship between the state and the citizen. ... As direct consultation sometimes through new bodies such as user boards with client as well as broader groups of citizens increases, considerations arise about the relationship between the existing democratic processes and these new consultative arrangements. Citizens are also represented in representative bodies (city councils and parliaments) by elected politicians. Direct consultation with citizens may change the role and functioning of representative bodies, since it provides new channels for information on the needs of the citizens to reach decision makers’.

#### *2.4.3 Balancing service demand and supply*

There are other important differences in the provision of public and private sector services which can further complicate efforts to seek to meet customer expectations more effectively. By explicitly focusing services on the needs of customers, it is likely that customer expectations of services may be raised. Failing to meet these expectations will then be perceived as a quality failure, even though services in effect may actually have been improved. In addition, in actively seeking the views of customers on quality, for example by setting up a complaints procedure that will result in an increase in complaints, issues about poor quality are made explicit. As such, at least initially, an increase in the number of complaints may result and this may present particular management challenges for public service organisations that may have a bureaucratic ethos and operate in a non-competitive environment.

In addition, funding for service provision which comes directly or indirectly from the state is often fixed by annual allocation, through the Exchequer budgetary arrangements. Consequently, within the public service, mismatches in demand and supply can find expression in longer waiting lists or the rationing of services. In fact the relationship between demand and provision in the public services can be perverse in private sector terms. As Pollitt and Bouckaert (1995) point out, ‘A fall in demand can actually be a relief, with less pressure, more time for professional development, research or leisure, little or no reduction on budget. An increase in demand, by contrast, may be very unwelcome, because it means more pressure on staff and facilities but probably no increase in budget (or only a disproportionately small one). It is only in recent years that changes in budgeting practices have begun to lessen these ‘perverse incentives’ by relating budgets to workload or performance (p. 12).

#### *2.4.4 Balancing competing interests*

Public services are delivered within limited resources and trade-offs may be required between meeting the needs and expectations of different users, as well as organisational efficiency. In addition, demand for services may outstrip supply, impacting on access to services and the ability of providers to deliver to standards that they themselves would value (see Humphreys 1998). Potter (1988) identifies a particular paradox relating to the provision of public services.

On the one hand, the nature of public services suggests they are of the utmost importance to those consumers who want to use them; on the other hand, the interests of individual consumers must constantly be juggled against the interests of the community as a whole, and of other groups who make up the community.

Equally, Donnelly (1999) observes

The nature of many public services is such that there is collective or community payment for services which are not always enjoyed personally by every paying citizen. Conversely, there are some services where the individual receiving the service does not pay directly, or at all, for the service.

In such circumstances, the scope of external consultation may need to extend beyond the customer to include other stakeholders, including the taxpayer.

From the above discussion, it can be appreciated that in the public service context it is not always immediately clear which types of 'customer' are to be consulted. A particular example of this dilemma can be seen in the criminal justice area, where the victim(s), the offender(s), the members of the community, the courts, the probation service and the taxpayer can all be argued with validity to be 'customers' or stakeholders of the law enforcement system. Each of these groups would have needs and expectations of that system which need to be addressed, if not with equal weight. In addition, as Flynn (1990) observes, service providers may have very different views from those of customers about the provider/user relationship. 'Some head teachers think that education is a privilege while many pupils feel it is an imposition. Residents in old people's homes may feel like customers while the staff treat them as the beneficiaries of welfare' (p. 181).

## **2.5 Rationale for consultation**

A review of the national and international literature indicates a number of significant reasons for the public service in general to consult with its external customers. As Pollitt (1996) has

observed, ‘The whole point of such [engagement] is that it should increase the probability that the service in question will be progressively shaped along the lines that its users would choose’ (p. 138). Within the public service, a key concept of quality is ‘fitness for purpose’ (see Humphreys et al 2001). A product or service is fit for purpose if it meets with the purpose for which it is intended. However the question inevitably arises, fit for whose purpose? For example, who decides the purpose for which a service is intended, the providers or the end users? Public services need not only to be fit for specification and fit for purpose, they need to meet the qualitative and quantitative needs of users and potential users of those services. As a consequence, customer engagement is a vital component when seeking to develop customer-focused services. Edvardsson (1998) argues that customers are co-producers of services and their part in the process of service delivery effects results in terms of added value and quality.

Within the wider context of regulatory reform, ‘the active involvement of citizens and businesses in the development and review of regulations is needed to ensure that regulations are workable, acceptable and enforceable’ (Boyle 1999, p.29). The OECD (2001) sees such reform as a vital tool for ensuring that the Irish economy remains sufficiently dynamic to ensure continued growth. Responding to consumer needs (via consultation), as well as changing market opportunities, are seen as important elements of this approach. However, it is also valuable to explore in more detail some of the specific motivations that can underpin customer engagement strategies.

Claver et al (1999) emphasise the central importance of the external customer in public service organisations. They identify a number of key features of quality public service provision: (a) tasks and activities are solely aimed at usefully serving citizens; (b) the organisation is judged according to the quality of the service given within the resources available and (c) the service offered has a shared value between staff and the customers for whom it is intended. Steele and Seargeant (1997) identify three main types of reasons for public service bodies to engage with the public:

- *Specific* reasons are the most important and these fall into four main categories: (a) the exploration of needs; (b) the development of policies, plans and strategies; (c) the setting of priorities for services; and (d) the assessment of service performance.
- *Contextual* reasons are regarded as less obvious and relate particularly to culture and attitudes. Such motivation often derives from a belief in the value of consultation per se or the desire to empower users. Steele and Seargeant (1997) also identify other contextual reasons that are less disinterested in their motivation, e.g. the desire to generate or create public support for an idea that would then become an obstacle to implementing a political decision.

- Finally, organisations may have instrumental reasons that may not be explicit but serve to undermine the success of consultation. Such reasons would include ‘going through the motions’ by complying with requirements to consult or using consultation to defer difficult decisions.

Effective engagement with the citizen is, however, best seen as part of a wider movement to enhance the quality and accountability of public administration. As Löffler (2001) has observed

... a high quality public administration must not only be able to increase customer satisfaction with public services but also build trust in public administration through transparent processes and accountability and through democratic dialogue. In order to do so, conventional business concepts of quality which regard public agencies as service providers and citizens as customers must be enriched by a democratic concept of quality which perceives public agencies as catalysts of civic society and citizens as part of a responsible and active civic society.

OECD (2001b) specifically addresses the question: why strengthen government-citizen relations?

OECD countries are strengthening their relations with citizens, in order to:

- Improve the quality of policy, by allowing governments to tap wider sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions in order to meet the challenges of policy making under conditions of increasing complexity, policy interdependence and time pressures.
- Meet the challenges of the emerging information society, to prepare for greater and faster interactions with citizens and ensure better knowledge of management.
- Integrate public input into the policy-making process, in order to respond to citizen’s expectations that their voices be heard, and their views be considered, in decision making by government.
- Respond to calls for greater government transparency and accountability, as public and media scrutiny of government actions increases, standards in public life are codified and raised.
- Strengthen public trust in government and reverse the steady erosion of voter turn-out in elections, falling membership in political parties and surveys showing declining confidence in key public institutions (p.2).

Towards Better Regulation (2002) also comments that

A general trend which has been observed in many countries is decreasing interest and growing disengagement on the part of ordinary people with the traditional institutions and regulatory processes of the State and with trans-national bureaucracies. Reversing that trend is a challenge globally and one method increasingly being used to involve citizens in decision making is the use of public consultation processes.

## **2.6 Concluding remarks**

To summarise, public service providers are not subject to the commercial disciplines of the market place. They are not directly accountable to financial shareholders nor are they operating in a competitive environment where consumer preferences have significant implications for market share, share value and the very viability of that organisation. Nonetheless, the services provided can be of crucial importance to the economic and social well-being of the country concerned. Those services are also diverse and complex both in functional and organisational terms, including: giving or receiving payment, advice and information; providing entire services such as education, health or transport; and law enforcement and tax collection (see Shand and Arnberg 1996). Relationships between customers and providers of services are also often considerably more complex than those found between customers and providers in the private sector. Whatever the nature of the public service concerned, it is clear that effective consultation with the recipient, customer, user or stakeholder of those services can be vitally important to the efficient and effective management of the service itself.

Quality public services need to be developed, designed and delivered in a manner which is genuinely customer-focused and responsive to changing customer needs and expectations. Within the public service in particular, the complex relationship between the customer and the range of other stakeholders (including the staff, the taxpayer and elected representatives) needs to be understood and managed effectively to minimise conflicts of interest in terms of what is understood as quality customer service. Challenges relate also to the nature of public services, their diversity and complexity, and to the fact that roles, responsibilities, functions and budgets are externally imposed upon public service organisations. Quality customer service relates essentially to how customers perceive services and how these experiences relate to expectations. Quality customer services need to be refocused on the customer and this will require citizen participation in the design and delivery of services. Real participation will require customer and citizen involvement to move beyond consultation towards the promotion of partnership and negotiation between all stakeholders.

As Burns et al (1994) argue ‘an inventive approach to customer relations can win loyalty and, in certain situations, strong support for ... services’. Speaking specifically within an Irish setting, Murray (1990) concluded that

The myriad of services and taxes administered by the civil service affect hundreds of thousands of individuals each year. It would be surprising if every one of these individuals was happy with the service they receive. It would be amazing if the poor image of the service were not in part the result of the justified anger and frustration of these individuals, justified not because their claims were rejected but rather by how their claims were handled. I know of no development more apt to improve the image of the civil service and, more important, to raise the standard of public administration than an improvement in the quality of services provided to the public.

## **Approaches to Engagement**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Having established in Chapter Two the wider public service reform and quality management contexts within which concern for more effective engagement with the external customer has arisen, it is now necessary to review the broad spectrum of different approaches to engagement that can be used. In addition, this chapter summarises available international evidence in order to identify a good practice framework within which national and international initiatives can be placed.

### **3.2 What is meant by engagement**

In their analysis of experiences in OECD countries, Lunde (1996) and Arnberg (1996) identify a wide range of different methodologies for consulting with external customers. These include small-scale surveys of key informer groups; larger scale customer satisfaction surveys; local/regional/national opinion polls; referenda; surveys of geographically defined populations where spatial factors are believed to be significant; feedback from the frontline experiences of service providers; user boards and suggestion boxes; customer complaints procedures; user advisory boards; representation of users on boards; focus groups; brainstorming groups; monitoring of news media reports; as well as public hearings or sounding board meetings.

Many of these means of engagement are currently deployed within the Irish context to varying degrees (see Chapter Six). For example, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development consults regularly with representatives of its key producer interest groups over the development of its services. The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has for many years sought feedback from ongoing consultation with customers and staff, as well as regular customer surveys (see Chapter Seven). In addition, as will be seen in Chapter Four, the development of a social partnership model in Ireland has led to the involvement of employer and trade union organisations, as well as a wide range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in the development and monitoring of policy and service delivery initiatives.

From the regulatory reform perspective, Boyle (1999) identifies three main elements to user involvement: (a) general notification on regulatory activities, e.g. through regulatory plans or

information centres; (b) consultation on specific actions, often as part of regulatory impact analysis; and (c) structured participation through advisory groups. Drawing upon its cross-national analysis of approaches to regulatory reform, the OECD (1993 and 1994) identifies a number of key considerations when engaging in public consultation:

- Introducing public participation can require significant changes in existing regulatory processes, and significant changes in the attitudes of administrators. In particular, consultation processes imposed from above without training and oversight often lead to government officials going through the motions.
- If it is to be genuine, public consultation processes must ensure that the public is well informed on the issues. Governments must be pro-active about generating usable information.
- Consultation must occur at an early enough stage to affect decisions. Waiting until the minister has already approved a proposal may be too late.
- Accessibility to the consultation process should be fair, and not biased towards narrow interest groups.
- Processes of consultation and participation must be carefully structured, particularly so as not to introduce intolerable delays and costs.
- Effective communication of regulatory processes and proposals to affected citizens is a particular concern. Clarity, simplicity and legal transparency of regulatory proposals and decisions are needed.
- An energetic and involved network of organised interest groups – a healthy ‘civil society’ – is critical to the success of public consultation.

Overall, there are three main categories of public involvement in regulation identified by the OECD (1994): (a) *notification*, basically the provision of information; (b) *consultation*, asking citizens and businesses to provide comments and advice; and (c) *participation*, providing citizens and businesses with an opportunity to assist in establishing regulatory objectives, determining the general strategy, and drawing up initial regulatory proposals.

In their analysis and evaluation of the wide range of different types of consultation used by public authorities in the UK to date, Steele and Seargeant (1997) rightly stress that choosing the right method of consultation is extremely important. This choice should be determined by the purpose of the consultation exercise, the characteristics of those to be consulted and the organisation’s experiences and capabilities. They also stress that even the right method will not produce useful outcomes unless the process is planned and managed well, deploying general project management skills, as well as skills and tasks specific to the consultation. From their analysis, not perhaps surprisingly, they conclude that the most difficult phase for

organisations was decision making after the consultation. Steele and Seargeant (1997) also argue that, ‘The current popularity of consultation appears to endow it with powers it does not possess. It is not a suitable tool for resolving conflict or avoiding difficult choices’. They also noted that in many cases, changes or actions stemming directly from the consultation were hard to find. Finally, Gaster (1995) stresses that if consultation processes are put in place, they must be integrated with formal decision making mechanisms, otherwise these processes will be marginalised and eventually unsupported.

### 3.3 Levels of engagement

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the means of engagement with external customers needs to be appropriate to the purpose of that engagement, whether it is to receive feedback on the delivery of services, to assist in the development of an appropriate regulatory regime or to provide a valuable input to policy formulation. In effect there is a hierarchy of potential levels of engagement which needs to be identified and discussed further in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the types of issues involved and the action that might be appropriate.

This hierarchy of engagement was identified by Arnstein (1969) over thirty years ago in her ‘ladder of citizen participation’ which differentiated between three levels of engagement in terms of the degree of citizen power that was involved (see Figure 1). In Figure 1, a wide range of potential types of engagement, as well as motivations on behalf of public bodies, is identified. Such is the continuing usefulness and relevance of this paradigm that it merits a brief review.

**Figure 1: Sherry Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation**

8. <i>Citizen control</i>	<b><i>Degrees of citizen power</i></b>
7. <i>Delegated power</i>	
6. <i>Partnership</i>	
5. <i>Placation</i>	<b><i>Degrees of tokenism</i></b>
4. <i>Consultation</i>	
3. <i>Informing</i>	
2. <i>Therapy</i>	<b><i>Non-participation</i></b>
1. <i>Manipulation</i>	

Source: Arnstein (1969)

- *Non-participation*: At the minimum levels, no participation is encouraged, with the emphasis being on *therapy* and *manipulation* (see also Steele and Seargeant 1997). At levels one and two, the aim of engagement is to educate the public and to achieve support for the organisation's objectives through effective use of public relations.
- *Degrees of Tokenism*: Meaningful engagement only begins with *information*. However, at this earliest stage the engagement and flow of information tends to be one-way with little provision for external feedback. The situation is improved by *consultation* through attitude surveys, community meetings and public enquiries. A further step is characterised as *placation*, where typically hand-picked 'representatives' are invited to join committees. However, the power holders retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of any advice received. As a result, these three stages were still seen by Arnstein (1969) as token gestures.
- *Degrees of Citizen Power*: *Tokenism* is certainly not a feature of the higher levels of the ladder. Under *partnership*, power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and the organisation concerned. Such responsibilities as planning and decision-making are shared through joint committees. At the most advanced stages of *delegated power* and *citizen control*, citizens progress further from having delegated powers to make decisions, e.g. through holding a clear majority on committees, to being responsible and accountable for the functions of management, planning and policy making.

Arnstein's work (1969) has been extremely influential and has been applied in a wide variety of contexts. Examples are as diverse as models for children's participation (Hart 1992 and 1997) to the evaluation and promotion of community development in Africa (Dreyer 2001) and the UK (Wilcox 1994). Arnstein's ladder has similarly been adopted, with modification by the World Bank (Paul 1988 and World Bank 1996), as well as the OECD. For example, on the basis of experiences to date in OECD member states, Lunde (1996) suggests that there is a continuum of involvement by external customers in the delivery of services by public bodies:

- *Information*: At this first level, the customer is provided with information about the services available. The primary purpose of this customer information is to increase transparency and facilitate the handling of enquiries by providing the necessary details to help any subsequent application. In turn, this can lead to more effective processing of claims. The main challenge for public bodies at this level is to identify the appropriate target group and then reach that group when it has been identified.
- *Consultation*: At this level, the customer is invited to give views on the service concerned. However, these views may or may not impact upon the delivery of the service itself because responsibility for such decisions remains with the service provider or

government. For the public service manager at this level, the principal challenges relate to defining the user and devising appropriate means of consultation (e.g. through surveys or focus groups).

- *Partnership*: The progress from consultation to joint or shared decision making with regard to public service provision represents a significant change in the approach to user engagement. It signifies the adoption of an empowering rather than listening strategy and applies to situations where users have veto rights and/or are represented in more than a token fashion on decision-making bodies. Particular problems at this level include determining who will represent user views and how to manage situations where user views diverge significantly.
- *Delegation*: At this higher level of engagement, users are themselves empowered to make decisions, within an agreed framework determined by the service providers or government. Again, it can be difficult at this level to determine who will represent the users, how will the process of decision making be organised and who will be accountable for failures as well as successes in service provision.
- *Control*: Finally, the public service can adopt a strategy of complete empowerment, where users have full responsibility for and control over the provision of services. Although examples of this level of empowerment are comparatively rare, community run transport schemes or housing estate management would be near approximations.

### **3.4 Emerging themes and issues**

More recently, OECD (2001b) has identified three key themes and trends in the complex relationship between government and citizen. These are information, consultation and active participation.

#### *3.4.1 Information*

The OECD (2001b) defines information as a one-way relationship in which government produces and delivers information for use by citizens. It covers both ‘passive’ access to information upon demand and ‘active’ measures to disseminate information to citizens. It notes that information for citizens is now an objective shared by all OECD countries and that the scope, quantity and quality of government information provided to the public has increased greatly over the past decade. Information is seen as a basic prerequisite for citizen engagement. ‘Access to information requires sound legislation, clear institutional mechanisms for its application and independent oversight institutions and judiciary for enforcement. Finally it requires citizens to know and understand their rights and to be willing to act upon them.

Within the Irish context, at central government level, the laws, policies and institutions particularly relevant to this level of engagement would include: the Official Secrets Act (1963), the Ombudsman Act (1980), the Data Protection Act (1988), the Strategic Management Initiative (1994 onwards), Delivering Better Government/Better Local Government (1996), Public Service Management Act (1997), the Freedom of Information Act (1997), the Quality Customer Service Initiative (1997 onwards) and the Equal Status Act (2000) (see Chapter Four).

### 3.4.2 Consultation

The OECD (2001b) identifies consultation as a two-way relationship by which citizens provide feedback to government. It depends upon the prior definition by government of the issue on which citizens' views are being sought and requires the provision of information. In its study, the OECD notes that while the opportunities for citizen engagement through consultation have risen in recent years, the pace of change has been at a slower rate than for information and large differences remain between member states. Whilst the OECD recognises that effective consultation should be central to the policy-making process, this recognition is a recent phenomenon in many member states where the necessary legal, policy and institutional frameworks are still in development. In this respect, the Irish experience of the partnership approach as evidenced by *Partnership 2000* and the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000) appears to be advanced by international standards and incorporate elements that go beyond consultation into active participation (see Chapter Four).

### 3.4.3 Active participation

The OECD (2001b) defines active participation as a relationship based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping policy dialogue, although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government. To date, the OECD note that examples of such arrangements are comparatively rare and largely on a 'pilot' basis. Examples cited of where such initiatives exist include provisions for citizen-initiated referenda and joint working groups to develop policy initiatives. The comparatively low level of engagement noted by the OECD to date relates specifically to active participation by citizens in policymaking. It does not refer to active participation in other areas, e.g. the development of services, which also come within the remit of this CPMR study (see Chapter One).

## 3.5 Concluding remarks

This review of the literature indicates that there is a wide spectrum of possible levels and types of potential engagement with the external customer, ranging from token gestures or

public relations exercises to the empowerment of citizens in policy formulation. Likewise, the means of engagement that can be deployed range from the minimal use of comment boxes to high-level engagement through participative fora. International best practice, as identified by OECD (2001b) suggests that three broad but appropriate levels of engagement for this study are information, consultation and active participation. Within the particular context of this study, these levels of engagement relate not just to the interface with individual citizens but also to consultation with, and participation by, customer organisations in the commercial and non-commercial sectors.

## **The Irish Policy Context For External Customer Engagement**

### **4.1 Introduction**

It has so far been possible to draw upon current national and international thinking in order to explore some of the important conceptual issues relevant to the effective engagement of public service bodies with the users of their services: their external customers. Quality management literature, as well as evidence from cross-national experiences, has been drawn upon to help identify the key themes in international and national good practice in this area. In the light of this analysis and the identification of the three themes of information, consultation and active participation, the overall approach to external consultation utilised to date by the public service in Ireland can be reviewed and assessed.

### **4.2 Reasons for increased customer engagement**

The Irish public service provides a wide range of services that are essential for the economic and social progress of the country and impact either directly or indirectly upon the lives of all citizens. These services include central and local government administration, the military and police forces, the education and health sectors, as well as a wide variety of other regulatory and non-commercial public bodies<sup>4</sup>. Its organisational structure is complex and its external customer base is extremely diverse. As will be seen later, some parts of the public service already have a considerable track record in external customer consultation, most notably the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs. Others are only just beginning to plan or implement significant initiatives in this area. It is therefore important to obtain an overview of the rationale for Irish public service bodies engaging with their customers in this way.

Several generic reasons for effective external customer consultation by public service organisations, that are appropriate in an Irish context, have already been identified (see Chapter Two above). In summary, external consultation is driven by the desire for a more responsive government that is better fitted to the needs of the citizens it serves, citizens who fund these services. Put at its simplest, there has been a growing recognition internationally that effective consultation with the external customer is good for business. It is an integral part of quality management and public service modernisation.

In the Irish context, such arguments have particular resonance because of the profound process of social and economic change that has been experienced over the past decade. In Ireland, it is vitally important that the regulatory regime in operation and the services delivered by public bodies to citizens, businesses and other organisations are responsive to changing needs and expectations for a number of specific reasons.

- *Economic imperatives:* As a small open economy, quality public services have a key role to play in creating and sustaining the necessary environment for socio-economic growth. Such services are vital during periods of economic growth as well as periods of downturn in the economic cycle. Whatever the macro-economic conditions, effective consultation has a key role to play to ensure that the services provided are responsive to these changing needs and expectations.
- *Public service modernisation:* Since 1994, the Irish public service has been undergoing a major programme of modernisation. From the external customers' point of view, the state's ability to deliver quality services will be a key test of the success or failure of this modernisation programme to date.
- *Rising customer expectations:* As well as their engagement through the democratic process, customers are also gradually gaining a more assertive voice in the development of public services, including through their representation in formal partnership arrangements with government. In the future, if international experience is a good guide, expectations will continue to rise on customer service and regulatory reform issues and the public service will need to demonstrate its flexibility in responding to these wishes in a meaningful way.
- *Employer of choice:* Despite recent economic developments, the Irish public service is continuing to compete as never before with the private sector to recruit and retain the best staff. Effective engagement with the external customer can play a valuable part in re-invigorating a culture of service in public bodies and renewing the motivation of employees, thus assisting its positioning as an 'employer of choice'.
- *Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs):* The revolutionary potential offered by ICTs to transform the Irish public service is gradually being realised (see Bellamy 1996). There is now growing recognition that the potential exists, as never before, to consult with customers in an innovative and flexible manner.
- *Political engagement:* In the political domain, representations made to government often relate to service delivery and/or regulatory issues. Many of the shortcomings experienced by citizens and organisations with current arrangements could be addressed earlier by more effective consultative arrangements. Such improvements could have beneficial implications for public service organisations in their interface with the political domain.

In combination, these inter-linked social and economic factors represent additional drivers for improvement in the current arrangements for engagement between the Irish public service and those it serves. However, without doubt, a number of significant policy developments have also taken place in recent years that have helped to create a more favourable environment for change.

### **4.3 National policy context**

It has already been seen that across the OECD governments are making real efforts to consult and engage more effectively with their citizens in a variety of contexts, whether it be service delivery, regulatory reform or policy development (see Chapters Two and Three). Such trends can also be seen in Ireland over the past two decades. These trends have been facilitated by a number of important legislative and administrative provisions that help to provide the necessary foundations upon which more effective engagement can build. These developments include legislation to improve the access of citizens to information and the establishment of consultative and partnership arrangements in association with national pay agreements. The major elements in this favourable policy environment are summarised below.

#### *4.3.1 Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) (1994 onwards)*

The provision of quality services by public bodies to the wide variety of customers they serve is at the heart of the current programme of public service reform, the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI). *Delivering Better Government* (DBG, 1996) saw ‘the achievement of an excellent service ... for the public as customers’ as the central thrust to its change agenda. DBG (1996) advocates the adoption of a new approach to quality service delivery premised upon a number of principles, including ‘consultation with and participation by customers on a structured basis’ and ‘the provision of quality information and advice to customers’ (p.11). DBG also stated that ‘a partnership approach between community/voluntary organisations and the civil service will help to promote a greater openness and build a deeper relationship between them in the interests of delivering better public services’ (p. 11)<sup>5</sup>.

#### *4.3.2 Modernisation in local government*

From the mid-1990s onwards, the Strategic Management Initiative has also been rolled out through the local government sector with a strong emphasis on effective engagement with citizens at the local level. In July 1995, a *Government Statement on Local Government Reform* outlined an approach which ‘undertook to promote the local empowerment of people by renewing the system of local government in order to return the greatest amounts of opportunities to an effective and accountable local government system.’ In March 1996, local authorities were asked to develop *Strategy Statements* (Corporate Plans) as part of the SMI

modernisation programme and the *Operational Strategy* produced by the Department of Environment and Local Government. Published in December 1996, *Better Local Government* (BLG) established a major programme of reform that was underpinned by a number of core principles, placing considerable emphasis on the critical importance of local engagement. For example, these core principles include:

- *Enhancing local democracy* by ensuring that local communities and their representatives have a real say in the delivery of the full range of public services locally.
- *Serving the customer better* through a focus on customer needs, rigorous but streamlined operation of regulatory controls and more openness and transparency in decision making in local authorities.
- *Developing efficiency* through the development of partnership between central and local authorities and between local authorities and other organisations.

On the question of customer service specifically, it must be noted that BLG stressed, ‘it is a matter for local authorities to develop their own quality initiatives in accordance with local circumstances and priorities and to set out their intentions in this regard in their SMI strategy statements – different approaches can be adopted to similar issues’ (p. 42).

Within the local government sector, *Modernising Government – the Challenge for Local Government* (2000) recognised that delivering quality customer services is at the heart of the current reform programme. Accordingly, it outlined a range of service indicators for local authorities, which will help individual authorities benchmark their performance against others. Progress against these indicators is reported in annual reports. Local authorities are now on their second iteration of corporate plans.

#### 4.3.3 *Regulatory reform*

DBG (1996) recognised that ‘a country which regulates badly puts itself at a serious economic disadvantage vis-à-vis its competitors’ and, in this context, stressed the importance of regulatory reform. In particular, concern focused on the need to reduce the regulatory and administrative burden on small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (see *Partnership 2000*). Better regulation is seen as being critically linked with maintaining and improving competitiveness, which as the National Economic and Social Council (NESC 1999) point out ‘is a moving target in a changing context’.

In *Reducing Red Tape: An Action Programme of Regulatory Reform in Ireland* (1999), the government set out a programme of action with regard to regulatory reform. This programme placed considerable emphasis on the importance of consultation with customers and other

external bodies in order to inform regulatory reform. In summary, the programme stressed the following main action points.

- Departments/offices would consult with customers and other interested parties as to the priorities for regulatory reform.
- Based upon those consultations, departments/offices would list relevant legislation (both primary and secondary) and identify the scope that existed for its consolidation, revision and/or repeal. As previously indicated, this would be done with particular reference to barriers/burdens to market entry and the administrative burden on small businesses.
- Departments/offices would then ensure that the views of users/customers would be identified and taken into account in relation to the ongoing review of the quantity and quality of legislation/regulation in force and to the introduction of new legislation. It was envisaged that this would be done through existing consultative mechanisms and/or the establishment of new user groups.

External commentators, however, have referred to the slow rate of progress that has been made to date under this initiative, the need for stronger implementation and the desirability of moving away from a ‘command and control’ to regulating behaviour (see OECD 2001a). The OECD (2001a) specifically recommended the introduction of a system of Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) as a means of providing a structured method for the evaluation of policy options where regulation and/or legislation is required (see Boyle 1999). The use of RIAs was approved by government decision in April 2001. As *Towards Better Regulation* (2002) observes, ‘RIA is essentially a form of evidence-based policy making where proposals for regulations are based on an objective assessment of available evidence. While different models of RIA exist, they generally ... [incorporate] a built-in consultation requirement whereby affected parties and wider society can offer views before regulations are enacted’.

Under the auspices of the Department of the Taoiseach, a High-Level Group has been formed to take forward the issues identified by OECD 2001a. In the first instance, this Group has initiated a programme of consultation to inform the development of a National Policy Statement ‘to set out the core principles which will guide our approach to the framing, introduction, and enforcement of regulation in existing and new areas’ (*Towards Better Regulation* 2002). Subsequently it is anticipated that the Group will examine specific aspects of regulation as well as the skills and structures needed to support this analysis<sup>6</sup>.

#### 4.3.4 *Social partnership*

The OECD (2001a) notes that, ‘As successive governments in the 1980s sought to tackle the crisis facing the Irish economy due to burgeoning public debt, it became apparent to the

social partners (government, employers, trade unions and farming organisations) that fighting over shares of a declining income was fruitless' (p. 21). In response to this situation, a *Programme for National Recovery* (1987) was agreed by these social partners, which subsequently proved to be a milestone in the development of a partnership approach at national level to addressing a range of economic, social and industrial relations questions. Such national partnership agreements have developed and evolved since that time and have been the subject of a number of evaluative studies, particularly at the enterprise or organisational levels (see Boyle 1998, O'Donnell and Teague 2000). From an external consultation point of view, however, the more interesting development has been the inclusion in more recent years of a 'fourth partner', namely the voluntary and community sectors. Based upon this social partnership model, a range of national level organisations have developed including the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), the National Competitiveness Council and most recently the National Centre for Partnership and Performance established under the current national pay agreement: the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF).

The PPF (2000) specifically stresses that 'improved standards of service follow from a strong focus on the needs of recipients, the setting of challenging standards in service delivery, and making the best use of available resources. In this context, it is essential to provide for consultation with, and feedback from, both the providers and users of the services in order to identify the required improvements and validate the progress being made subsequently in improving service delivery' (p.21). In fact, the PPF (2000) prescribes one of the primary objectives of the modernisation of the public service as 'to provide excellent services that meet recipients' needs in a timely and efficient manner'. To act as an additional incentive, the PPF provides that certain pay increases will be paid in return for the agreement and achievement of specific performance indicators, one of which is 'the implementation of challenging service standards set in consultation with the recipients of the service'. Provision is also made for the establishment of Quality Assurance Groups for each sector, whose remit is to ensure that such performance indicators are sufficiently challenging.

Finally, under the PPF, it is envisaged that the newly revised Principles of Quality Customer Service (see Annex 1) should apply to all public services and that they be extended by each department to include any public service organisation, agency or body for which it has responsibility. In so doing, however, it is acknowledged that many public service bodies have already made significant progress and that developments under PPF in the wider public service will complement work already in hand.

#### 4.3.5 *The Quality Customer Service (QCS) Initiative: 1997 onwards*

Without doubt, one of the most significant policy development measures in recent years has been the launch of the Quality Customer Service (QCS) Initiative. Drawing upon the work of an earlier QCS Working Group, this Initiative was launched in May 1997 to promote the wider adoption of improved customer service standards by government departments/offices. In 1997, for the first time, each department/office was required to produce a two-year Customer Action Plan indicating how full effect would be given to a number of guiding principles for the delivery of quality customer service. Referring back to the three-fold framework proposed by the OECD (2001b) (see Chapter Three), these principles potentially covered not only information and consultation but also active participation.

For example, these initial guiding principles included:

- *Quality Service Standards*: Publish a statement of standards that outlines the nature and quality of service which customers can legitimately expect and display it prominently at the point of service delivery.
- *Information*: Take a pro-active approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact and meets the needs of people with disabilities.
- *Consultation*: Provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services.
- *Choice*: Provide choice, where feasible, in service delivery including payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times.

When the first Customer Service Action Plan period was drawing to a close in 2000, the Taoiseach announced that departments/offices should review and refine their plans to meet the continuing and emergent challenges of the next few years. To inform this review, and in addition to work already referred to (see Humphreys 1998 and Humphreys et al 1999), the then SMI Team at the Taoiseach's Department had undertaken two evaluative surveys to review progress under the plans at their mid- and end-points. Drawing upon this external and internal evaluative work, a number of major areas requiring further action were identified which needed to be tackled seriously during the next phase of the QCS initiative (see Humphreys et al 2001).

Humphreys et al (2001) found that too often QCS still appeared to be seen as an additional task, amongst many, rather than as an essential and integral part of departmental business. Likewise, while all departments/offices have some degree of contact with external customers, quality customer service was still too often seen as an issue only for the large operational

departments. As a result, comparatively few departments/ offices appear to have engaged in significant business restructuring to place customer service values centre stage. Overall, there remained a marked reluctance to engage effectively with external customers in the development and evaluation of services. Customer surveys and panels were still the exception rather than the rule. Likewise, little was known about the use made of information obtained from other more simple devices like customer comment cards. Humphreys et al (2001) also argued that more work was required to develop and target services to the needs of comparatively disadvantaged groups.

Given the extent, character and significance of the challenges that need to be overcome before the civil service, and wider public service, adopt wholeheartedly a quality customer service approach to their businesses, a new QCS Working Group was convened in Autumn 1999. The new QCS Working Group examined the Principles adopted in 1997 and recommended a number of revisions to ensure that the next phase of the QCS Initiative is up to date in the light of subsequent developments. In particular, three new Principles were enunciated: (a) Equality/Diversity (given the advent of the Employment Equality Act (1998) and Equal Status Act (2000)); (b) Official Languages Equality (given the proposed Official Languages Equality Bill) and (c) the Internal Customer (see Annex One for full details).

#### *4.3.6 Customer Service Action Plans (2001-2004)*

In July 2000, the government decided that:

- The revised QCS Principles would be adopted throughout the civil service.
- Departments/offices would update, refine and publish their new Customer Action Plans (CAPs) so as to give full effect to these revised Principles and to ensure continuous quality improvement.
- Departments/offices needed to ensure that the new Principles were firmly embedded in their strategy statements and business plans and would report progress against CAP goals and objectives in their annual reports.
- Finally, the new QCS Principles were to be extended by each department/office to include any public service organisation, agency or body for which it had responsibility.

In the Guidance Notes prepared by the Department of the Taoiseach (2001a) to assist departments/offices in producing their CAPs, renewed emphasis was given to the importance of effective external consultation. These Notes make it clear that it is vitally important to ensure that

...services are and remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs of customers ... Within the context of a changing environment, departments/offices should ensure that they have identified their customers (internal and external). It is also vitally important that consultation is not regarded as a once-off event as expectations and needs are likely to change over time. Meaningful consultation requires commitment to an on-going partnership approach aimed at continuously improving services. In this context, it is important that consultation is not deferred until after the introduction of a scheme/service but instead is part of the development/introduction process. In some cases, departments and offices may wish to carry out consultation as part of the overall consultation process on Strategy Statements.

The regulatory reform agenda is also not overlooked. It is acknowledged in the Guidance Notes that the quality and the quantity of regulation impacts heavily upon standards of customer service. Accordingly, it is stressed that the new CAPs should capture fully the potential for business test panels and user groups to improve the quality of the regulatory process. Overall, departments/offices should indicate, within their CAPs, the external customers to be consulted as well as the methods of consultation. The way in which these aspects of the Guidance Notes have been followed to date by departments/offices will be covered in the review of current practice in Chapter Six.

#### *4.3.7 Information and communication technologies (ICTs)*

Finally, in taking the QCS Initiative forward, the government has also stressed that best use be made of available and emerging technologies to facilitate improved access to information and improved customer choice through the development of on-line services. Of particular relevance in this regard is the government decision on Information Society (IS) developments and on the adoption of an e-broker model as the framework within which electronic public services should be delivered. A range of sites are currently available focused upon particular services including social services ([www.reach.ie](http://www.reach.ie)), business ([www.basis.ie](http://www.basis.ie)), citizen information ([www.oasis.gov.ie/](http://www.oasis.gov.ie/)) and tendering for government contracts ([www.tendersireland.com](http://www.tendersireland.com)).

Guidelines have been issued to inform and ensure consistency of standards for departmental websites, and standards for departmental websites are to be incorporated into the new round of Customer Action Plans. In addition, on-line services are also currently being provided by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners ([www.ros.ie](http://www.ros.ie)), the Land Registry and the FÁS (National Employment Service) on-line jobs service ([www.fas.ie](http://www.fas.ie)). An SMI website has been launched as a central information and contact point at <http://www.bettergov.ie>. Once more, the potential offered by rapidly developing ICTs for more effective external customer consultation is considerable.

#### **4.4 Concluding remarks**

An examination of the developing national policy approach to effective engagement with the external customer has indicated that, building upon underpinning legislation in areas such as the establishment of an Ombudsman's office and Freedom of Information, the focus to date has been on regulatory reform and improved QCS as integral parts of the public service modernisation programme. A key element of that programme is the developing QCS Initiative from 1997 onwards. Historically, while departments/offices such as Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, Social Community and Family Affairs, as well as the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, have been involved with external customer consultation for a number of years, evidence of either a long-term commitment or systematic service-wide approach is more recent. This position is rapidly changing given the impetus provided by the OECD (2001a) review and the next phase of the QCS Initiative. However, there remains a considerable amount to be learned and practical experience to be shared from an examination of international experiences in this area (Chapter Five) as well as a more in-depth assessment of Irish experiences to date (Chapters Six and Seven).

## **International Experiences of External Customer Engagement**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In Chapter Three, it is concluded that the method(s) used by organisations to consult with their external customers need to be appropriate to the purpose in hand, whether that engagement is designed to receive feedback on the delivery of services, to assist in the development of an appropriate regulatory regime or to provide a valuable input to policy formulation. In fact, drawing upon a review of different conceptual approaches which have been identified in the literature, a hierarchy of potential levels of engagement exists internationally, ranging from information provision through to citizen control (see Arnstein 1969 and Lunde 1996). Choosing the right method of consultation is extremely important. This choice should be determined not only by the purpose of the consultation exercise itself, but also the characteristics of those to be consulted, as well as the organisation's experiences and capabilities. It was also noted in Chapter Three that even the right method of engagement would not produce useful outcomes unless the process is planned and managed well. Indeed, the most difficult phase for many public service organisations is the decision making after the consultation has been completed.

There is a wealth of valuable information available internationally on best practice in the area of effective engagement with the external customer. This material is available by way of cross-national reviews and national and sub-national case studies. In order to help synthesise, evaluate and present this diverse material in a manner that assists delivery of the study's terms of reference (see Chapter One), a number of different national approaches is presented. Each of these national studies illustrates differences of emphasis in approach that are potentially relevant to the current position in Ireland. These national studies are Australia, Canada, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. Supportive information from other countries, such as Finland, is also referred to as appropriate to illustrate or amplify particular points. In addition, when reviewing these national studies, it will be valuable to reflect on the three tier framework most recently used by OECD (2001b) in order to assess where particular approaches fall within the spectrum of levels of engagement. These three themes are information, consultation and active participation.

### **5.2 Australia: engagement and service integration**

Over the past two decades, public service modernisation in Australia has focused on achieving a more efficient, effective and responsive public service. An integral part of that approach has been a considerable effort to engage more effectively with the external customer in the identification of needs. The overall approach to public service modernisation has also been somewhat different to, and at times has appeared to lack the radicalism characterised by, New Zealand and the United Kingdom<sup>7</sup>. Australia has been

...driven by a neo-liberal agenda with the development and implementation of a new variant of a management/market model. Of the more active public sector reformers in OECD, Australia was once the most cautious of the Anglo triumvirate with regard to embracing market approaches. However, Australia could more recently lay claim to having become the leader. This was partly by default because the others slowed down as they moved from the reform cycle to more reflective or consolidating phases under social democratic governments, but mainly because Australian activity had been resurgent under the first neo-conservative government of the reform era (see Halligan 2000).

Central to this process of change both at the federal and state levels has been the emergence of the concept of the citizen/customer in the wider sense used in this study, namely both individuals and organisations involved in and/or impacted upon by policies and programmes. In addition to the types of emergent international trends identified by OECD, a number of domestic factors have supported this new citizen focus. These include changing economic conditions, neglect of communities and sectors, political alienation, loss of trust and increasing service level expectations (see Halligan 2000). Such drivers are remarkably similar to those previously identified in Ireland (see Chapter Four). In the Australian case, the response to the drive for improved customer information, consultation, participation and responsiveness has been to focus on decentralisation/devolution to intrastate levels, organisational change to improve the integration of service delivery and effective use of ICTs through the development of e-government solutions and improved accessibility to services through web portals. One of the paramount and most relevant examples of the impact of these reforms in the service delivery area is that of 'Centrelink' (see Husock and Scott 1999).

In September 1997, the then Australian Prime Minister launched Centrelink as a 'one-stop-shop' integrating customer access to government services previously provided across a number of portfolios (see Vardon 1998). The establishment of Centrelink separated policy from service delivery with the aim of improving customer service, quicker decision making and enhancing value for money through improved service linkages. In summary, Centrelink delivers payments and services for five federal or Commonwealth departments, ranging from income support to employment services (see <http://www.centrelink.gov.au/>). Although

Centrelink is a statutory authority reporting to the Minister for Social Security, it is not part of that department organisationally, and its operating funds are derived from the Commonwealth departments who purchase its services. The core client base lies with the Departments of Social Security, Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

One of the primary objectives for Centrelink is to increase customer and community involvement and satisfaction with services. In order to achieve this objective, Centrelink has worked to:

- develop a customer service culture;
- understand customer and community expectations;
- achieve greater involvement of the community in determining service needs;
- redesign services to better meet customer needs, and to deliver one-stop-shop capability using every appropriate means of service style and information technology. Customer research showed that clients preferred their own case manager;
- measure customer satisfaction; and
- maintain customer confidence in confidentiality and privacy arrangements.

In operationalising this strategy, Centrelink has used a charter approach to standards setting and achievement through consultation with its customer base. The Centrelink Customer Charter was developed following extensive consultation with customers, community groups, the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman and customer service staff themselves (i.e. internal customers). The Charter is regularly reviewed with the involvement of client departments, staff, customers and community groups to ensure its relevance and currency. Every two years, customer satisfaction research is also carried out to measure performance against the commitments made in the Charter.

In addition, Value Creation Workshops are held between staff and customers to help define and review customer expectations and needs in order to bring about service improvements. This has been a major exercise involving over 200 workshops in individual service centres and involving over 3,500 customers (see Vardon 1998). Centrelink trains accredited facilitators to guide the workshops which, amongst other things, are used to rank features which customers value or dislike in customer service. These are then compared with staff's expectations regarding customer likes/dislikes. Customer views regarding service delivery from these workshops are then used to prepare action plans for improved customer service. Each Centrelink Customer Service Centre is assessed twice yearly against the commitment contained in the Charter. A comprehensive customer feedback and complaints mechanism is also in place and a Customer Relations and Compensation Group has been established to

handle the more difficult cases of complaint. As previously indicated, the internal customer dimension has not been neglected in this initiative and some five hundred staff across the organisation have been trained as ‘customer service champions’ and they work to connect staff to the strategic directions/development of a customer service culture. Finally, Centrelink is actively involved in developing a life-cycle approach to meeting the changing needs of citizens through the use of ICTs.

### **5.3 Canada: engagement through quality-management**

The Canadian approach to the enhancement of quality services through engagement with the customer has been somewhat different from that in Australia and the United Kingdom. The Canadian federal government committed itself to strengthening citizen-centred service delivery by launching the Quality Services Initiative in 1995 (see Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 1995). Arising from this initiative, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat in partnership with the National Quality Institute (NQI) developed *A Framework for Effective Public Service Organisations*. A similar approach has been adopted in other OECD countries such as Finland<sup>8</sup>. In Canada, the NQI is a not-for-profit organisation ‘committed to enhancing Canada’s national well-being through the adoption of quality practices and principles in all sectors’ (see Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 1998). This framework assists departments to achieve ‘effective citizen-centred service delivery.’ The framework provides the foundations for the Canada Awards for Excellence and is also the basis of quality award programmes run by individual state quality organisations (e.g. Alberta and Manitoba). Subsequently, and to make further progress in this area, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (1997) has produced *Canadian Quality Criteria for the Public Sector*, in association with the NQI. One of these Criteria or Quality Principles is ‘Primary Focus on clients/stakeholders: To achieve goals, the primary aim of everyone must be to fully understand, meet and strive to exceed the needs of clients and stakeholders’.

The Canadian approach has also been innovative in its use of networks to promote meaningful citizen engagement. For example, in 1997 a Citizen-Centred Service Delivery Network (CCSN) was established by the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD). The CCSN comprises over 200 service quality leaders from across the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government. The CCSN defines citizen-centred service as service improvements rooted in citizens’ and clients’ priorities for improvement – organising services from their perspectives rather than the organisation’s perspective. Drawing upon the results of nationally commissioned research, a ‘Citizens First Service Model’ has been developed which is based upon (a) citizens’ service needs and expectations, (b) access to services, (c) service delivery, (d) perceptions of service quality and (e) citizens’ priorities for development.

Through the use of research survey data to assess customers' informational needs, a range of difficulties was identified, including problems locating services, difficulties with telephone access, difficulties with the quality and accessibility of explanatory information, parking and travel. The research also showed that citizens encountered two major barriers when trying to connect to government services. There were difficulties with the telephone service – due to busy lines, problems with voice mail or not being able to find the number in the blue pages; and finally, difficulty obtaining accurate information – being 'bounced' from person to person, being given conflicting information or being given incorrect information (CCMD 1998). Building upon this research, standards have been set, in the light of customer preferences and needs, across a wide area of areas of activity including written, telephone, voice and e-mail contacts, response times, waiting times and the number of different people handling enquiries.

Drawing upon this customer feedback, the CCSN has developed a checklist to guide providers through service improvement plans for handling telephones and information requests. This checklist includes the following types of questions.

- How often do your clients get an engaged tone and, if this is frequent, have you explored options to address this?
- Do you and your staff return phone messages within four hours of receipt?
- If you are unable to return phone calls within four hours, does your reply explain when you will be able to return the call?
- Does your voice message provide clients with the option of reaching a person?
- Can citizens locate your phone number, e-mail, website and mailing address easily?
- Do your staff have access to the information they need to answer client queries?
- Are your staff trained and do they have the tools necessary to meet all the information needs of clients?
- If your staff do not have access to all information necessary to answer client questions, do they know who possesses that information so that clients are 'bounced' no more than once?

Similar checklists have been developed for other areas, e.g. for improving timeliness (CCMD 1999). The CCSN has emphasised the need to take a holistic, government-wide approach to developing citizen-centred services, as citizens will often need to contact more than one department in order to fulfil a single service need. Through e-government, they are exploring the use of web portals to achieve this.

Finally, the Government of Canada (2000) has stated its commitment to a significant, quantifiable improvement in client satisfaction with its services over the next five years. To deliver on this commitment, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2000) has published, *A Policy Framework for Service Improvement in the Government of Canada*. This development takes forward the Service Improvement Initiative and places a strong emphasis on establishing documented baseline measures of citizen satisfaction for a range of key services. In particular, citizen expectations, satisfaction levels and service improvement priorities are to be measured annually using the Common Measurements Tool (CMT) developed by the CCSN. The CMT uses a five-point satisfaction scale that can be applied to public organisations with similar business characteristics and which allows them to compare results and benchmark with each other. In addition, individual provinces now require individual departments and offices to produce Service Statements, in consultation with their customers, together with Service Enhancement Plans to ensure delivery (see, for example, Quebec 2002).

#### **5.4 Denmark: engagement through institutionalised consultation and information provision**

At the outset, it is important to appreciate that the Danish administrative system is highly decentralised, with policymaking and more especially policy implementation in many areas being undertaken at regional and municipal levels. Following a local government reform programme in 1970, local government enjoys a high degree of autonomy accounting for 54 per cent of total public spending or 33 per cent of total GNP (see Lauritzen 2001). Overall, some two thirds of public service employment is at these sub-national levels. This decentralised system of service delivery and policy development is particularly significant in the social services area.

In comparison with more centralised systems, such as Ireland, it could be argued that effective engagement with the citizen/customer is potentially more likely to be successful in such a decentralised administrative framework. Gallup research in 1998 has also indicated that Danish citizens' trust in public institutions and public servants is extremely high by international standards (see Danish Ministry of Finance 1998). The same study indicated that comparatively few citizens would prefer public sector cutbacks (even if linked to tax reductions) and overall satisfaction with public service quality is high and improving. To assist with the analysis of trends, similar surveys had been previously undertaken in 1993, 1994 and 1995.

The Danish system is characterised by the institutionalised involvement of stakeholders in the policy making process across a wide range of areas (OECD 2001c). Such consultation and

participation typically takes the form of fixed-term law preparing committees, permanent commissions and/or a wide range of written consultative procedures for stakeholders. Such a consultative approach to engagement, embracing NGOs on a systematic basis, is both made possible and facilitated by the high level of involvement by Danish citizens in ‘group-based interest associations’ (e.g. residents’ associations, parents’ groups, immigrants’ groups) and ‘cause-orientated associations’ (e.g. humanitarian, leisure/cultural and political groups). In 1990, it was estimated that three quarters of Danish adults were members of such associations (Andersen 1993).

As a consequence, the normal route taken by the Danish public administration in the preparation of new legislation, for example, is informative, participative and consultative, embracing civil society and the business community. Departments in preparing legislation first consult with other departments at an early stage. Draft bills are frequently first published on the Internet for consultation prior to presentation to parliament. Ad-hoc committees (including representatives of relevant public bodies and NGOs) are often established and precede major amendments or larger reform initiatives. Reports from such committees feed into the drafting of the relevant legislation. A further phase of written consultation then takes place on the formulation and anticipated consequences of proposed legislation at the draft stage. The Bill is then presented to parliament together with the submissions received and the minister’s response. Bills at this stage are also normally presented before the Ministry of Trade and Industry’s test panels to test the administrative burden of the proposals.<sup>9</sup>

Within the wider area of engagement with external stakeholders, many user boards in institutions delivering social services are established by law. For example, Section 62 of the Local Government Act (1995) requires that each municipality shall account to the local residents for the content and character of the major public services offered or planned to the residents of that area. Every two years, a statement is required that includes information about the goals identified by each municipality for development in its area. As a result, user boards are a common feature of the delivery of services at municipal level. For example each municipality must establish a Senior Citizens’ Council to be consulted on local decisions impacting upon the elderly<sup>10</sup>. User panels are also often established for other specific groups (e.g. persons with disabilities) or to address specific issues (e.g. kindergartens). Likewise, the involvement of stakeholders in labour market policies is underpinned by law, so that all reforms and changes in labour market policy are formulated and implemented in close institutionalised co-operation between the Ministry of Labour and key stakeholders.

‘Given the considerable responsibility for socio-economic development of the country, it is not surprising that central government shows a considerable interest in local government performance’ (Lauritzen 2001). As previously indicated, Section 62 of the Act (1995) made

local government responsible for providing their citizens with information on the quantity and quality of the main services provided. The development and publication of performance measures is a responsibility centrally of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior. The scope of such service information for citizens is currently being extended. For example, the Ministry for the Interior is currently developing service information at the institutional level for schools, kindergartens, nursing homes etc. Such developments feed into 'Local Government Key Figures' which have been published since 1984 and allow citizens to compare local authorities across a wide range of activities including revenue collection, charging for services and patterns of expenditure. Work is on-going to improve the sensitivity of these key figures to differences between authorities in the efficiency and quality of services provided. In addition, the Ministry of the Interior has now developed and published the results from an aggregate score system, based upon key indicators from areas such as child and elder care, primary/secondary schools etc. As will be seen later, such systems for the assessment of performance and the provision of information to citizens have been important features also of the approach adopted in the UK.

Finally, during 2000, the government concluded four national hearings specifically concerning the quality of welfare. Citizens, interest groups, public servants and politicians were invited to express their opinions about the problems and challenges in sectors relating to care of the elderly, healthcare, family issues, schools and the inclusive labour market. Approximately 3,200 people participated in the twenty-one regional hearings held across the country. In addition to the hearings, the government has conducted an in-depth interview survey of the general population and service users, focusing once more on health and social welfare issues. With regard to the inclusive labour market, an additional survey of 1,025 companies was undertaken to assess business views on subsidised employment (see Danish Ministry of Finance 2000). The results from these surveys and consultative hearings are currently being evaluated and acted upon. A similar initiative has been undertaken by the Finnish Government<sup>11</sup>.

## **5.5 United Kingdom: engagement through the drive to improve standards**

Looking back over nearly forty years as a civil servant, the Head of the Home Civil Service (UK) recently said

In the years after the last war, most people in the UK at least were prepared to regard public services as a favour bestowed by a benign State. They were prepared on the whole to put up with long waits in grubby premises, to fill in long forms and submit themselves to bureaucratic procedures because it gave them more than they would otherwise have got. Not so now. People have paid their taxes and fees. They feel

empowered. They compare what they get from central and local government in the UK with what they get from the private sector – and with the level of service they are expected to provide in their own jobs – and they want something that is good, efficient, focused imaginatively on their needs, whether you are talking about health or education or transport or law and order (Wilson 2000).

Perhaps more than any other OECD member state, the UK has had longer experience of, and has adopted a more radical approach to, the modernisation of its public services from the citizen's perspective. In addition, pressures on public spending led to a need to raise quality without increasing expenditure and, as a result, many public service bodies initiated quality service delivery programmes. Part and parcel of this process in public service organisations was the development of the Citizen's Charter and from that the continuing development of the Charter Mark.

The charter approach has been since adopted in a range of other OECD countries, including Australia, Canada, Finland, France and Portugal (see OECD 1987 and 1996)<sup>12</sup>. In 1991, the UK government first set out its proposals for a Citizen's Charter in a white paper (see Humphreys 1998). The Charter programme aimed to improve public service quality, has a 10-year time frame and was said to have represented 'the most systematic attempt to date to make explicit what users of services can expect from them' (see Lawton and Rose 1994, p.168). It was based on four themes (quality, choice, standards and value) and introduced a set of 'principles of public service'. These principles included setting standards of service; being open and providing full information; consulting and involving customers and encouraging access and the promotion of choice.

The *Service First Unit* in the Cabinet Office issues guidelines on how to produce charters and encourages all service providers to consult with the users in drawing up the charters, including compensation policy. In addition, individual public bodies have initiated their own charters that include explicit commitments to improving quality standards. For example, the Inland Revenue and Benefits Agency Charters, following consultation with its customers, provides a wide range of information on diverse issues such as opening hours/contact details, specified standards of service, performance against published standards, the rights and responsibilities of customers, what to do when things go wrong. They also commit to regular local and national surveys to keep in touch with customer views over time.

The Charter Mark scheme evolved from the Citizen's Charter initiative and has proved to be one of its most successful features at all levels of national and local government. The then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (2000) asserted that the Charter Mark 'provides a good discipline for reviewing a service from the user's perspective, whether

as part of a Best Value Review or otherwise. This can lead to more joined-up approaches to service delivery, as this is frequently the direction of change which users want, and can test the assumptions of the organisation against genuine user feedback.’ The Service First Unit within the Cabinet Office is responsible for the Charter Mark scheme, which recognises and encourages excellence in the public service. Any public service body providing a service direct to the public, which manages its own staff and budget, can apply for a Charter Mark. It has a very strong focus on customer service and because of the desirability of receiving recognition through the Charter Mark, many public service bodies have begun to listen and respond to their customers far more systematically and effectively (see Humphreys et al 2001).

Like Denmark, the UK has also placed major emphasis on the development and publication of service standards and targets, reflecting to a large extent its approach to managing public services – devolved responsibility within departments and to executive agencies along with mechanisms aimed at enhancing accountability. The approach taken is to clarify what should be expected of public services in national standards and then to make organisations accountable for the delivery of these standards through regular monitoring, reporting and external scrutiny. Schools and local education authorities have their examination results and other performance indicators publicised every year, universities are ranked on the quality of their research and teaching (Research Assessment Exercise), and, since 1983, the National Health Service (NHS) has published Health Service Indicators.

In 1997, six standards were introduced for central government departments and agencies, and were revised in the *Modernising Government* White Paper in 1999/2000. These standards include (a) providing clear and straightforward information about services and those of related services providers, (b) having a well-publicised complaints procedure and (c) consulting users and potential users regularly about the service and reporting on the result. Following the publication of *Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People* (1998), the government introduced a new performance management framework for local government. As part of its Best Value Initiative (BVI), the Local Government Act (1999) placed a duty of best value on local authorities to make continuous improvements in the way they operate (see Boyle 2000 and Lauritzen 2001). From 31 March 2000, local authorities are required to publish details of their performance against Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) in the Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP). Local authorities are also required to produce data on Audit Commission Performance Indicators (ACPIs), which cover areas not included in the BVPIs. Indicators relate to: corporate health, education, social services, housing and related services, environmental services, cultural and related services, and emergency services. In each category, a number of ‘quality’ BVPIs have been specified to explicitly reflect users’

experience of services and guidance has been developed for the conduct of user satisfaction surveys.

To assist in driving this process forward, it is anticipated that improvements in performance will be linked to 'beacon status' for local authorities. This scheme, that was introduced in 2000 and is based upon external assessment, identifies Beacon Councils that have demonstrated excellence through performance in terms of their responsiveness, modern management practices and best value services (see <http://www.idea.gov.uk/beacons>). Achieving beacon status gives local authorities greater freedom and discretion in the ways their services are managed. Under Round Two (2001-2002), a number of Beacon Councils were specifically acknowledged for their work in improving citizen access for services, including their best practice approach citizen engagement<sup>13</sup>. The aim of the Beacon Council Scheme is to identify centres of excellence in local government from which other councils can learn.

Finally, the UK has been extremely innovative and diverse in its use of customer consultation techniques. For example, in addition to the People's Panel<sup>14</sup> and Citizens' Juries<sup>15</sup>, a wide range of consultative techniques are currently utilised at national and local levels. In November 2000, a web portal register was introduced to provide access to all the main written consultations currently in progress across government (<http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/>). Through CitizenSpace, it is possible to respond to such consultations as well as to participate in related on-line discussion groups. A commitment has been given by government to report back on the outcome of these consultations. In a similar manner, NGOs have contributed to the consultative fora available. For example, the Hansard Society has provided an on-line public space to debate issues concerning parliamentary democracy (see <http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/>).

In addition, approaches are varied according to local circumstances. For example, in Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council has committed itself to a decentralised pattern of government and service delivery through the establishment of community councils for consultation and participatory purposes (see <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/community/part1.htm>). In England, Bristol City Council has used referenda, web-based consultation and citizen's panels (see <http://www.bristol-city.gov.uk/>). In the Greater Manchester area, Stalybridge and Tameside Councils use district assemblies and consultation groups to address specific issues and their local impact. The list of innovative approaches is considerable and growing.

## 5.6 Concluding remarks

It is clear from even a brief overview of international best practice in the development of effective means of engagement with the external customer that a wide variety of approaches are available. Such approaches are also not mutually exclusive and are closely inter-related. For example, the UK approach has included:

- significant attempts at service integration as in Australia
- like Canada and Finland, it has promoted quality management through a variety of approaches, including the Business Excellence Model and Investors in People
- through initiatives such as the People's Panel (nationally), Citizens' Juries and a wide variety of other methods (locally), it has pursued, on a non-statutory basis, similar types of consultative and participatory arrangements to those in Denmark and Finland
- like Denmark, it has placed a strong emphasis on the publication of performance indicators by public bodies as part of the drive to improve standards.

Whatever the approach adopted, 'the overall aims of policy should be to improve and sustain the quality of all public services; to ensure that services are able to meet socially recognised needs; to guarantee access to services for all citizens who need them and fairness in the allocation of resources to those who need them most' (Bynoe 1996). Such an approach involves responsive public service delivery by 'motivating the workforce in public services and changing management and professional cultures' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998). Through an analysis of the approaches adopted in other countries, it has been possible to identify a wide number of different ways in which the customer can be engaged effectively. It will now be valuable to look at developing trends within Ireland regarding customer engagement and to look in particular at how some public service bodies are tackling the challenges involved.

## **Irish Experiences of External Customer Engagement**

### **6.1 Introduction**

As previously indicated in Chapter Four, as the result of a government decision (July 2000), all departments/offices are now required, through their Customer Action Plans (2001-2004), to 'provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services' (see Annex One). In addition, each department/office is required by the same government decision to extend this principle to any public service organisation, agency or body for which it has responsibility.

For the purposes of this study, it would be premature to attempt to consider the specific outcomes from the operationalisation of this principle for a number of reasons:

- Many of the plans are only at an early stage of implementation. Some were only completed towards the end of 2001, while others are yet to be published.
- Consequently, even an interim evaluation of the outcomes from the application of this principle across the civil and wider public service would not be appropriate before a mid-point in the planning period (2002/3).

It is also important not to duplicate, but to complement, other work that has been undertaken (see Butler 2002). Additional insights can be gained and overall knowledge of this complex set of issues enhanced. Therefore, in accordance with this study's terms of reference, this chapter will focus on the identification of examples of good practice here in Ireland and discuss and explore different approaches adopted by public service bodies in Ireland. Prior to the discussion of current Irish practice, however, it is important to explore further specific aspects of the policy context within which this practice has developed, and to provide an overview of the wider setting of consultative arrangements across the civil and wider public service.

### **6.2 Some contextual issues**

The overall policy context within which the quality customer service and regulatory reform initiatives have developed to date in Ireland is explored in detail in Chapter Four. However, before beginning to review the range of approaches in operation overall across the service at

present, it is important to establish clearly the qualitative context within which external consultation is currently being taken forward.

From a QCS perspective, in the associated Guidance Notes (2000) issued by the Department of the Taoiseach to support the preparation of the new Customer Action Plans, it is emphasised that

...it is vital that objectives and targets for service delivery reflect the expressed needs and expectations of service users. In this regard it is essential that each department/office actively identifies the interests and the needs of its customers in order to set service delivery objectives and targets. Some examples of methods of consultation that could be used include: customer panels, research surveys, structured contact with representative groups, comment cards, Internet facilities. Consultation processes should also include a focus on specific groups of customers as referred to in the Equality/Diversity Principle<sup>16</sup>. The Plan should include (in an Appendix) details of the organisations which have been consulted, as well as methods of consultation used (Section 4.2.2).

Similarly, from the perspective of regulatory reform, the Taoiseach in commenting upon the launch of the OECD (2001a) report confirmed that ‘The Government will continue to seek ways of strengthening the dialogue between government and wider civil society, especially consumers. Consultation improves the transparency and legitimacy of decisions and consequently encourages greater compliance; and the Report provides a welcome reminder of the importance of ensuring that consumer interests are given adequate voice’ (Ahern 2001). In moving forward to more effective engagement with the external customer, under either the QCS or regulatory reform agendas, it is vital to acknowledge the diversity of the customer base that is frequently involved and to develop appropriate, responsive and flexible strategies to respond to changing needs. Recently, in answering the question ‘What do citizens want from their Government and Public Administration?’, the Ombudsman answered

Of course they want a myriad of things, depending upon who they are and what particular hat they are wearing at the time. Citizens are taxpayers, mortgage holders, social welfare recipients, members of the Travelling community, employees, politicians, business people, drug addicts, prison inmates; they are young, old, middle-aged, healthy, sick, disabled; they are men, women, poor, rich, informed, uninformed ... one could go on indefinitely (Murphy 2001).

### 6.3 Overview of current arrangements<sup>17</sup>

This diversity of service users is mirrored to an extent by a diversity of service providers. Given the size and organisational complexity of the public service, it is not practical to attempt within the scope of this discussion paper to map all the different types of consultative arrangements that are currently employed across the public service. It is important, however, to attempt to give an indication of some of the current practices across the public service, not least to place the subsequent institutional analyses in context. This will be done using available documentary sources, particularly the recently published Customer Action Plans (CAPs).<sup>18</sup>

A review of the Customer Action Plans (2001-2004) for departments/offices indicates that, in comparison with the initial series of plans (1997-2000), there is considerably more explicit reference to external customer consultation across the civil service. There is also evidence of continuity. For example, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform in 1997 (i.e. under the old plan) established a Customer Liaison Panel which still meets twice yearly to examine and comment on such issues as the range and quality of services; accuracy of information supplied; its standard of presentation; the suitability of delivery methods; any deficiencies or omissions as well as proposed new services.

Most typically, and in addition to the use of comment cards and web-based feedback forms, frequent references within the CAPs are made to regular contact with the external customers either on an individual basis or via representational groups from their customer base. Like the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, some departments/offices have established (often for many years) consultative forums that bring together officials and a cross-section of organisations representing particular sectors of that department's business. For example, the Department of Education and Science identifies a number of areas where service providers and recipients have cooperated in specific policy reviews, including:

- The Points Commission
- Early Childhood Education
- The Task Force on Dyslexia
- Adult Education and
- Schools IT 2000.

The following are further interesting examples of consultative arrangements and initiatives.

- The Land Registry has a Customer Group which includes external representatives from the Conveyancing Committee of the Law Society, the Dublin Solicitors' Bar Association, the local authorities, financial institutions and law agents.
- The Valuation Office has a similar Consultants Forum drawn from the principal professional bodies in the area.
- The Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development established a Rural Development Forum in 2000 to assist in taking forward this policy area. Its new plan also includes commitments to the establishment of a Customer Liaison Panel and Regional Customer Panels.
- Likewise, as an input to the policy formulation process, the Department of the Environment and Local Government has hosted seminars and workshops on a range of issues in relation to planning, local government, housing and the environment. It has undertaken separate surveys of its local authority and agency bases in order to ascertain perceptions of the quality of services it provides to these key external customers. In addition, it has organised a seminar for senior staff and QCS officers to assist in the roll-out of customer action plans in the agencies for which it has responsibility.
- The Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation has led a major consultative exercise with local community organisations in the development of a National Anti-Drugs Strategy.
- The Department of Arts, Culture, Gaeltacht and the Islands has embarked upon a consultation exercise, involving its individual customers as well as representational groups. This exercise seeks to assess current levels of satisfaction with services and to identify appropriate mechanisms for ongoing participation by customers in the monitoring and development of services. Following this exercise, it is planned to publish a detailed strategy for future customer consultation in 2002.
- In addition to its on-going contacts with a wide range of data users and providers, the Central Statistics Office has established liaison groups in relation to macro-economic, census, energy, labour market, business, earnings and agricultural statistics.
- Regular surveys of its customer base are used by the Office of the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commissioners to monitor and improve its service delivery.
- The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Public Enterprise have commissioned independent external research to inform the development of their new Customer Action Plans. Both departments have published these research findings in support of their plans<sup>19</sup>.

Another of the interesting and encouraging developments evident in the latest Customer Action Plans is the conscious movement by a number of public bodies to place their previously on-going and/or periodic consultation with customers on a more systematic basis.

In this regard, the approach being adopted by the Ordnance Survey (2001) is an illustrative example.

In order to improve the service we provide to our customers, we consult with the people we serve on a regular basis in order to obtain their views and comments. This will help to ensure data that is fit for purpose and delivered in a timely fashion. While these consultations currently take place on a periodic basis, the practice of consulting with cross-sections of our customer base will in future take a more structured approach. Over the period of this plan, we intend to set up a number of different fora to provide regular structured consultation with customers, representative organisations and groups within our main programme areas. We intend to improve our current liaison arrangements by appointing Key Account Managers whose roles will include the implementation of mechanisms for formal feedback.

In some departments, the number of consultative bodies is considerable. For example, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners has established a number of such bodies to help communication and consultation with its customers. These include:

- The Tax Administration Liaison Committee (TALC) comprising Revenue officials as well as the Consultative Committee of Accountancy Bodies in Ireland and the Institute of Taxation and Lawyers.
- The Customs Consultative Committee which includes representative trade associations, such as the Irish Exporters Association, the Irish Road Haulage Association and the Irish Shipping Agents Association and which focuses on the simplification of rules and the reduction of customs compliance costs.
- The Revenue and Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) Liaison Committee that discusses and makes recommendations of particular relevance to PAYE taxpayers.
- The Small Business User Panel which focuses on the administration of PAYE and the social welfare systems and, together with officials from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (see Chapter Seven), has representation from the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME), the Small Firms Association (SFA), the Construction Industry Federation and the Chambers of Commerce.
- Revenue also has ongoing contact with a number of representative bodies including the SFA, ISME, the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) and the Society of the Irish Motor Industry (SIMI).

Contacts between the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and these bodies concentrates on 'identified need', e.g. significant changes that affect or are of relevance to representative

bodies members. Under the Customer Action Plan (2001-2004), the Revenue has given a renewed commitment to expanding its consultation arrangements through the use of customer surveys<sup>20</sup>, comment cards, exit polls and customer panels. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in its very favourable report on *Quality Customer Service in the Office of the Revenue Commissioners*, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the SMI recommends the development of reliable consultative/feedback mechanisms to obtain information from individuals, as well as organisations and tax professionals, as well as regular surveys of a representative sample of taxpayers.

Specifically from a regulatory reform perspective, the approach adopted by the Commission of Electricity Regulation (CER) has been cited as an example of good practice (see *Towards Better Regulation 2002*). Established in 1999, the CER is responsible for overseeing the 'liberalisation of the electricity market' through the licensing of generators and suppliers as well as ensuring fair and equal access to the electricity market. A three-week period is provided during which comments are sought from interested parties prior to making a decision, determination or direction. These comments are published with the eventual decision. In addition, industry forums for licence holders have been established and the Commission's web site used pro-actively as a key point of contact with its customer base.

However, in order to obtain a more in-depth appreciation of some of the different approaches to external consultation currently employed in the Irish public service, it is helpful to consider in more detail, both here and in Chapter Seven, the ways in which two different public service bodies have recently undertaken this task.

#### **6.4 Consultation for strategic policy development: Department of Health and Children**

In its preparation of its new national health strategy, *Quality and Fairness: A Health System for You* (2001), the Department of Health and Children (DoHC) engaged in an extensive and complex consultative process across a wide and diverse customer base. Details of these consultative arrangements and important issues that emerged are summarised in Annex Two. In comparison with its predecessor, *Shaping a Healthier Future* (1994), the new strategy reflects far more explicitly the increasing recognition within the public service of the need to demonstrate effective consultation with the external customer base in order to both inform and validate strategic thinking, policy development and policy implementation. As such, it represents a valuable example of how complex and high-profile policy issues can be taken forward through the use of consultative arrangements.

A total of 1,500 submissions was received from individuals and a further 300 from organisations. Structured feedback from both organisations and individuals was encouraged, by the use of a consultation pack (including a questionnaire). The aim of this pack was to obtain views on experience of health service provision, as well as on future change. Information obtained in this way was supplemented by a nationally representative market research survey of 2,000 adults. Consultation with external customers was supplemented by extensive internal consultations with health service staff. A separate linked consultation exercise was also undertaken through the National Anti-Poverty strategy (NAPS).

The overall consultation exercise, which was managed by a private consultancy firm, was overseen by a cross-organisational Steering Group comprising representatives of the parent department as well as Finance, the Taoiseach's Department and the health boards. To support and advise the Steering Group, a National Health Strategy Consultative Forum comprising key stakeholders was formed. This Forum itself was divided into eight working groups to address specific issues: namely, funding; eligibility; delivery systems/human resources; population health; quality; voluntary/statutory interface; e-health and futures in health care. The Forum was also supported in its work by an International Panel comprising experts from the UK, USA and the World Health Organisation (WHO). A detailed report on the findings from the consultation exercise has been published as a separate but companion volume to the Health Strategy itself (see *Your Views about Health 2001*). In parallel with the development and implementation of *Quality and Fairness*, the department is also employing a consultative approach in the preparation of a National Health Information Strategy. In combination, the external consultation exercises to inform the development of the new health strategies is probably the most comprehensive undertaken in the history of the state outside general elections and constitutional referenda.

Of equal interest to the approach taken in the preparation of the health strategy are the explicit commitments to continued consultation during its implementation. In this strategy, 'people-centredness' has been identified as a key principle. Feedback from the consultation process suggests that patients and clients often have to adapt to the way the system works, rather than the system responding to their needs. The consultation process showed that:

- people want to have a say in matters to do with their treatment
- people want to know what is happening when they have to wait for services and when they are receiving services and treatment
- systems and procedures need to be more user-friendly, taking account of the needs of particular groups

- having to give the same information ‘over and over again’ is a frustration for patients/clients in the system.

Submissions from organisations also identified the need for better mechanisms for consultation with a wide spectrum of interests (*Quality and Fairness* 2001, p.48).

In addressing the primary objective of placing the patient at the centre in the delivery of care, the new strategy gives a number of specific commitments, including:

- a national standardised approach to measurement of patient satisfaction through regular surveys and the systematic handling of complaints.
- encouraging and supporting individuals and families to become involved in the management of their own health care.
- development of an integrated and more holistic approach to care planning for individuals and
- the establishment of customer panels and Regional Advisory Panels/Co-ordinating Committees (including customer representation) in each Health Board area, as well as an annual National Consultative Forum to monitor implementation of the strategy.

The approach adopted in the preparation of the strategy, and the modus operandi for moving forward in customer consultation, represent a significant change to existing practices and culture in many parts of the health services. As McAuliffe (1998) observes, when commentating on international experiences

The traditional functional structures, with divisions between medicine, nursing support and administrative activities, with hindsight, seem to have served the needs of the organisation and healthcare staff more adequately than they served the needs of the patient ... Of course, the real issue is whether ... structural changes really do result in a more patient-centred approach ... Services can only become truly patient-centred by understanding the perceptions, concerns and expectations of patients/consumers and building the service around this core (p. 288).

It will be extremely valuable in future years to monitor progress made in the consultation with customers, and changes made as a result of this consultation, as the strategy begins to impact significantly upon service delivery.

## **6.5 Concluding remarks**

If a systematic audit of the extent and character of external consultative arrangements had been undertaken across the Irish public service at the beginning of the SMI modernisation programme in 1994, the picture presented would have been very different from that evident today. In particular, it would appear that the QCS Initiative launched in 1997 has provided:

- a valuable framework to assist departments and other public bodies take forward their existing commitment to customer consultation and
- a much needed impetus to encourage and support public bodies engaging in these activities more effectively.

In this respect, the approach adopted by the Department of Health and Children in developing, as well as implementing, the new national health strategy, compared to its 1994 approach, provides a valuable testimony to the types of changes in approach that are taking place within the Irish administrative system. Progress is being made at different paces and from different stages of development. However, real progress is being made.

Finally, before drawing together the evidence gathered overall by this research (see Chapter Eight) to help in guiding forward this process further, it will be very valuable to look in more detail at one of those public service bodies that has had the longest and most extensive experience of consulting with, and responding to, its customer base.

## **Developing A Consultative Culture: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The current Mission Statement of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) is to ‘promote social well-being through income and other supports which enable people to participate in society in a positive way’ (DSCFA 2001a). In his foreword to the *Strategy Statement 2001-2004*, the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs states that, ‘My Department has developed an excellent reputation for providing a high quality service to customers and I am determined that we maintain very high standards in this area ... We will continue to focus on developing and delivering supports and services that meet the expectations and needs of a wide variety of customers served by my Department’ (DSCFA 2001a). This reputation, as a pioneer in the development of quality public services in Ireland, represents a considerable transformation of organisational culture since the early 1980s, when a former secretary-general described the department as exhibiting ‘all the classical attributes of a civil service structure – hierarchical, highly centralised, inability to change ...’ (McCumiskey 1992). One of the cornerstones of this process of change has been a demonstrable and sustained commitment to external consultation and continuous improvement.

### **7.2 Long-term commitment to organisational change**

From the mid-1980s onwards, a number of significant organisational changes have been made to enhance the delivery and quality of the department’s services. These changes were prompted by a range of external and internal factors including, (a) increasingly tight budgetary controls nationally; (b) a growing concern, within the country, at the seemingly inexorable increase in social welfare expenditure; and (c) staff having to manage increasing claim loads, as well as coping with unsatisfactory levels of service provision, resulting in delays in service delivery and increasing customer complaints (see McCumiskey, 1992). In addition, there was a growing recognition internally, at senior management level, that change was necessary if the department was to meet its responsibilities to its stakeholders: i.e. customers, politicians and ultimately the taxpayer. There was growing recognition, therefore, of a very strong business case for change

In order to understand how the department has gone about its transformation, and before its particular approach to external consultation is considered in detail, it is important to appreciate some of the other key elements in its approach to organisational transformation. A number of aspects of the DSCFA's approach have been very important and this list is certainly not exhaustive. For example, the DSCFA has been pioneering in its use of ICTs to improve service delivery<sup>21</sup>. In addition, it has made a very significant commitment to the involvement of staff in the development of quality services, e.g. through its structure of partnership committees. Also, it was the first department/office to publish an Internal Customer Service Action Plan. However, the department's approach to organisational restructuring has served to underpin its commitment to mainstreaming QCS throughout its large and complex organisation.

Recognising that a major part of the department's work involves dealing with the public, a comprehensive customer service training programme was devised. The programme was designed in conjunction with training officers and staff members from across the department and following research into best practice in other service delivery organisations and feedback from our customers and their representative organisations. The content of the programme included how to provide a high quality service in the context of face-to-face communication; telephone behaviour; dealing with correspondence; disability awareness and how to deal with diversity; addiction awareness and stress management. Approximately 3,000 members of staff have received training to date.

### **7.3 Organisational restructuring and decentralisation**

Fundamental organisational re-structuring has underpinned all efforts to enhance the quality of services delivered by the DSCFA and provided a structural framework for its consultation with external customers. In 1986, the department was restructured to separate the policy making (Aireacht) and service delivery (Social Welfare Service) functions to help both improved policy formulation and greater autonomy and clarity of focus on operational issues (see O'Shea, 1996). In tandem with this development, an extensive localisation of the department's services commenced in the late 1980s. The aim of the localisation strategy was to deliver services closer to the customer<sup>22</sup>.

In addition, the department has undertaken a significant programme of operational decentralisation since the 1980s. This was part of the wider government programme to relocate units of central government away from Dublin (see Joyce et al 1988). For example, the department's pension schemes and services were decentralised to a newly established Pension Services Office (PSO) in Sligo. Decentralisation of Family/Employment Supports and Child and Treatment Benefit Schemes took place to Longford and Letterkenny

respectively. Further organisational restructuring took place in 1991 with the establishment of a new regional management structure. The aim was to facilitate the development of a more easily managed, better co-ordinated and responsive service at local level and, in this regard, ‘the boundaries of each region, in as far as possible, were defined to coincide with regions covered by other state services, thus allowing for closer liaison with regional managers of other statutory agencies’ (DSCFA 1997).

#### **7.4 Departmental profile**

It is also important to appreciate the scale and character of department’s business activities. As previously indicated, the department’s 4,500 staff are organised into two functional groups:

- to formulate appropriate social protection policies through the Aireacht<sup>23</sup> and
- through the Social Welfare Services (SWS)<sup>24</sup> to administer and manage the delivery of statutory and non-statutory social, community and family services.

The services delivered include social insurance, social assistance schemes and non-cash benefits. Such services include pensions, benefits, allowances and other supports, and directly or indirectly impact upon all citizens, at some point in their life cycles. From the external consultation point of view, therefore, the customer base is varied, ranging from specific categories of individuals (those unemployed, older people, carers, those who are ill or who have disabilities) to families and communities in general. The scale of business is also extremely large in public service terms, with payments made to approximately 875,000 people each week and over 1.7 million claims processed annually<sup>25</sup>. In fact, the department’s business profile in many ways more closely resembles a large national bank than a government department. In delivering its services, however, the department aims to adopt a distinctive and innovative approach.

#### **7.5 The department’s service delivery model**

Given the diversity of the department’s customer base, there has for some time been recognition of the need for a differentiated response to address the specific needs of different sub-groups within its customer base. This understanding has been informed, in part at least, by the structured feedback the department has received over a considerable number of years. For example, if the customer is a contributory pensioner or a Child Benefit recipient, their need for direct contact with the department will be far less than for an unemployed person or lone parent. This has implications for the method of service delivery required. Thus, the focus for the ‘lower maintenance’ client could be on providing cheap and convenient access

by telephone and web-based services. In contrast, the high maintenance client needs more direct contact with the local office and is more likely to benefit from a case management (or customer management) approach, where a more holistic response is made to customer needs. Instead of simply focusing on paying the customer, case management involves identifying other sources of support, such as assistance from other agencies and opportunities for employment or training. The department explains

Complex customer needs arise because many people who seek income support have requirements which must be supplied by other state services. As unemployment has declined, many of those who remain require specific tailored interventions to assist them. This also applies to some lone parents and people with disabilities. For some young people, a range of personal and family circumstances is preventing their entry to the labour market. Early intervention with this group may obviate the need for more serious intervention later on (DSFCA 2001a, p.9).

Accordingly, the department is committed to the roll out of its 'service delivery model' over the next ten years. Commencing in the Child Benefit system in 2002, this model is in effect an ambitious change management programme that, through the effective use of ICTs and its decentralised structure, seeks to place the customer at the centre of its services. Thus, for example, the model will aim to 'facilitate a more pro-active approach with an emphasis on completing the full transaction, as far as possible, at the first point of contact with customers. Differentiated responses will be offered, ranging from personalised case management for those customers with complex needs to automated transactions for those availing of services based on fixed rules and entitlements' (p.24). The understandings which have contributed to the need for this new approach have been gained from operational experiences, informed by internal consultation. They are also obtained, and potential ways forward identified, through systematic and effective engagement with the external customer.

## **7.6 Organisational commitment and approach to consultation**

The DSCFA's *Strategy Statement 2001-2004* identifies, as one of its three organisational goals, the need 'to deliver income supports and other services, to the highest standards, in co-operation with other relevant agencies'. As one of its core values, the department states that 'We value and respect the views of our customers and our shared responsibility in delivering and maintaining quality service' (DSCFA 2001a, pp.12-13). The same statement also makes a number of explicit commitments:

- Our aim is to have a customer-centred organisation delivering a service of the highest quality that takes account of best practice and the standards of leading customer service organisations.
- We will develop our organisation so that we can build services to meet the needs of individual customers.
- To deliver continuous improvement in quality customer service by placing the customer at the centre of the process.
- We will foster a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of service.
- Further develop the consultative process so that customers can express opinions, give feedback and become involved in the setting of challenging service standards (p.23/25).

Within the context of the current *Customer Action Plan* (2001-2004), these commitments and objectives to meaningful external customer consultation are operationalised in three main ways, through the use of:

- local and national customer surveys
- customer panels and
- a new comments and complaints system (DSCFA 2001b).

In order to obtain a coherent overview of the department's efforts at meaningful consultation with the external customer, it is important to review each of these approaches in turn.

## **7.7 Customer surveys**

Within the civil service as a whole, the department has pioneered the use of externally commissioned market research to obtain an independent assessment of customer perceptions of the services it provides. To date, three such surveys have been conducted for the department by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland (MRBI 1986, 1996 and 2001). The results of the most recent survey have been published by the department in summary form, in association with the new Customer Action Plan (DSCFA 2001c). As on previous occasions, the findings of this poll have been distributed to all staff, with booklets summarising the key findings made available to customers in the local offices. Undertaking surveys in this way provides not only valuable feedback to staff and customers, to assist with the improvement of services, but also makes it possible to monitor progress against the original benchmark study. In addition, the 2001 survey used qualitative research methodologies, including focus groups and in-home face-to-face interviews, for the first time. In addition to the general public, this survey specifically sought to consult particular groups within the customer base, e.g. lone

parents, old age pensioners, those who had been widowed (survivors), those unemployed and those with an illness/disability.

While the most recent survey continues to show a high level of satisfaction overall with the quality of services provided, as well as with the staff providing that service, a number of specific areas were highlighted for action by the department. These areas included, for example, comparatively low levels of awareness of the Personal Public Service Number, which has been developed and promoted by the department in recent years to facilitate service delivery. Likewise there were concerns expressed regarding privacy for meetings. There are also a number of areas identified that may have interesting implications for the wider development of quality public services, although the particular characteristics of the department's customer base must be borne in mind when seeking to interpret such findings more widely. For example, only 10 per cent of customers sampled envisaged communicating via e-mail with the department and only 9 per cent had Internet access at home. Only 2 per cent preferred to be dealt with by the department through the medium of Irish.

In addition to the large-scale national customer surveys, it is also important to remember that internally conducted surveys of customers are often carried out at regional/local levels. Approximately forty such surveys have been conducted since 1994, with the most frequent topics being: disability benefits (6), pension services (7) and unemployment (20). A recent example of this type of approach is the *Disability Allowance Customer Survey* (2001) that was conducted by staff in the Longford SWS. It involved the administration of a questionnaire to 1,000 randomly selected recipients of Disability Allowance since July 2000. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the department's Disability Consultative Forum.

Finally, 'touch-screen technology' has been used in certain offices to obtain feedback from customers at point of service delivery

## **7.8 Customer panels and other consultative fora**

The department has also been in the forefront within the civil service in its use of customer panels. Since 1994, over sixty such panel meetings have taken place across the country, dealing with particular customer groups/areas of service delivery (e.g. the unemployed, lone parents, pensioners, disabilities/carers). Participants are selected at random from the department's records. Some panels are national in character and some are locally constituted. Primarily, they provide an opportunity for informal discussion with officials on the service they receive. The minutes of panel meetings are fed back to senior management in the department and action taken where possible. Feedback is given to the customers on the

department's response to the issues raised. Panels are also used for systematic consultation regarding proposed initiatives, such as the new comments/complaints system, the development of the department's website, for proofing new informational material, piloting touch-screen technology and commenting on the draft MRBI questionnaire. Indeed, other public service bodies have been invited to participate in the panels when issues affecting more than the DSCFA have been identified. As a result, agencies such as FÁS, the local health board, the local authority and Revenue staff have participated in panels alongside departmental staff. Because of their level and length of experience with customer panels, DSCFA staff have also been able to advise other departments/offices planning to start such initiatives.

## **7.9 Comments, complaints and appeals**

For some time now, customer comment cards have been available in SWS local and branch offices to enable customers to make suggestions or comment on any aspect of the services provided. A comment card is also available via the department's website ([www.welfare.ie](http://www.welfare.ie)). However, as part of its wider programme to develop further customer consultation and feedback, a new Customer Service Comments and Complaints System has been introduced to formalise and develop further previous arrangements. A new booklet has been produced and widely distributed, which actively seeks comments and other feedback from customers under the heading: '*We value your opinion*' (DSCFA 2002a)<sup>26</sup>. Positive comments about the department's service delivery, as well as suggestions for improvement, can be fed back through this new system. However, one of the primary purposes in introducing the new system is to advance further in the area of complaints handling.

The types of complaint covered by the new procedure include perceived delays, mistakes or occasions when customer service received is below expectations or entitlement. The new comment/complaint form seeks to use plain and clear language. The new system contains explicit commitments from the department regarding how it will process any complaint and draw lessons for the future from any shortfall in service delivery. However, it is also made clear that the speed of handling a complaint places a responsibility on the customer to provide the information necessary for this purpose. Clear guidance is given to the potential complainant about the type of information that would help in this regard. The roll out of this new initiative has been accompanied by extensive awareness raising amongst staff (e.g. by the use of promotional material), the widespread circulation of a new guidance document on the policy (DSCFA 2002b), staff training and other support activities.

The new system also makes clear to customers that if they are unhappy with a decision of a Deciding Officer then they have a right of appeal to the Social Welfare Appeals Office

(SWAO). The SWAO was established in 1989 to provide an independent means of redress for customers who were dissatisfied with entitlement decisions made by the department. The office is headed by the Chief Appeals Officer, and it employs a number of Appeals Officers who have a statutory right to overturn decisions made by the department. While the office is staffed by employees of the department, a measure of its administrative and statutory independence is borne out by the number of favourable outcomes which take place from the customer's perspective and the public satisfaction with the services of the SWAO. In addition, customers who are dissatisfied with aspects of the service provided by the department have recourse to the Office of the Ombudsman.

The staff guidance document produced in support of the new complaints/comment system explains the rationale behind introducing such a system (see DSCFA 2002b). In seeking to answer the question, why good complaint handling is important, the department makes it clear that

The public is entitled to a high standard of service. It is not something for which they should be grateful. We, as providers of services, try as hard as we can to meet that expectation. Complaints, comments and suggestions provide us with a good measure of whether or not we are delivering a good service. They provide us with valuable market research ... Other reasons why the Department can benefit from treating complaints seriously include:

- We want to provide a high quality service
- We want to know when we make a mistake, so that we can then put things right for the individual, and stop the same mistake happening to others.

The main benefits that this will bring to the Department are:

1. We will spend less time on the costly correction of mistakes and dealing with ongoing disputes
2. It shows that we are an organisation willing to listen ... leading to ... greater co-operation with our customers (p.3).

## **7.10 Concluding remarks**

In 1998, the first CPMR study in the area of quality customer service concluded that, ' ... with some notable and noteworthy exceptions ... there is still a very long way to go before it can be asserted that Irish public service organisations have taken on board wholeheartedly the need to be customer focused throughout the design, planning, implementation, monitoring,

evaluation and review of the services delivered ... Rarely were customer needs placed centre stage' (Humphreys 1998). From the above departmental case-study, it can be seen that efforts to place the customer centre stage involve a long-term commitment to a fundamental change in organisational culture. While it is acknowledged within the department itself that the drive towards a quality service is a continuous process, there is little doubt that the DSCFA has made significant strides over the past decade and a half to transform itself from a traditional inwardly focused culture to one which is striving genuinely to engage more effectively with its extensive, diverse and often economically disadvantaged customer base.

Within the context of this research, the DSCFA case study is of interest to other public service organisations because it indicates the range of different approaches that can be taken when seeking to engage effectively with the external customer base, whether that base comprises individual citizens or local, regional and national groups. That is not to suggest that approaches adopted in one department are necessarily appropriate elsewhere. However, whatever the public service organisation concerned, it would be unusual for it not to benefit in business terms from active consideration of the appropriateness of a modern comments/complaints handling system, the use of customer panels and other consultative fora, not to mention local/national surveys to assist in identifying significant issues for its customers and against which it could benchmark future developments.

In addition to the above examples of specific initiatives, however, the approach adopted by the DSCFA is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the benefits of adopting an holistic approach to transforming service quality. The development of effective consultative arrangements with external customers cannot be dealt with in isolation from real efforts to focus on the needs of those who have to consult and act upon the information obtained. This has significant implications for training, staff development and support, not to mention equivalent consultative arrangements within the organisation itself. While it is outside the scope of the current study, the concept of the 'internal customer' is taken seriously within the department (see DSCFA 2001d). As the department's recently launched *Internal Customer Service Plan 2001-2004* correctly recognises, 'In order to deliver an excellent service to the customer our internal customer service must be of a similar standard. It is clear that good external and good internal customer service share the same qualities (e.g. timeliness, courtesy, informing and consulting with the customer)' (DSCFA 2001d, p.4).

Finally, by drawing upon the national and international examples of good practice in approach and implementation identified and discussed in Chapters Five to Seven, as well as the conceptual and policy contexts explored in Chapters Two to Four, it is now possible to explore issues to be considered by Irish public service organisations in seeking to engage more effectively with their external customers.

## Moving Forward

### 8.1 Introduction

The research evidence presented in this discussion paper has shown that substantial progress has been made, and is being made, by Irish public service organisations in consulting with a diverse range of external customers. As Chapters Four and Six illustrate, many public service bodies are becoming more proactive and systematic in their approach to external consultation as part of their response to the Quality Customer Service Initiative. Much firmer commitments than before are given in some Customer Action Plans to moving forward in this area. Similarly, the evidence presented in Chapter Seven indicates how progress in terms of effective consultation can best be achieved within the context of a wider programme of organisation change focused on achieving a culture of quality customer service. Over the past decade and a half, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has pioneered the use of customer panels, as well as local and national surveys, to inform both its policy development processes and service delivery systems. That department has also recognised that progress in terms of effective external customer consultation and engagement is inseparable from action across a wide organisational front including addressing staff training and development, as well as addressing other internal customer service issues.

In comparison with the good practice examples identified internationally in Chapter Five, however, efforts to engage effectively with the public service's external customers are still at a comparatively early stage in Ireland. These efforts are often not underpinned by statutory or institutional requirements on public bodies to consult. In addition, as Chapters Two and Three indicate, there is a wide spectrum of approaches to engagement with the citizen/customer evident in the international literature. In particular, research evidence indicates that there is a strong business argument to be made for more effective engagement by public service bodies with their customers, just as public service organisations themselves need to progress from token gestures at consultation to pro-active engagement in the development of policy, the delivery of services and regulatory reform.

Above all, there is growing acknowledgement that

Customer-focused government should be seen as one aspect of a successful approach to government in response to rapidly growing public demands. Customer-focused organisations demonstrate four critical strengths. They:

- *Understand the customer* – clarity about who customers are, how they are defined, their interests, needs and behaviours and what government wants to do for/with them, for each major function within the organisation.
- *Build operations around the customer* – ensuring that the basic building blocks of the organisation – such as strategy, performance measures, systems, processes, structure and behaviours – support a focus on delivering desired customer objectives.
- *Manage stakeholder relationships* – making it important to manage relationships openly and communicate effectively, both with end customers and with other stakeholders such as industry groups and service partners.
- *Use customer understanding to deliver target outcomes* – exploiting the investment in the previous areas to improve performance against objectives and maximise efficiency (Barker 2001).

## 8.2 Issues arising

Having reviewed and evaluated carefully the national and international literature available, as well as having identified and discussed in-depth examples of good practice both in Ireland and overseas, the primary objective of this final phase of the research study is to identify and discuss key issues to be addressed by public service bodies to encourage more widespread and effective consultation with external customers (see Chapter One). In identifying and discussing these key issues, and in order to help inform and encourage the wider adoption and more effective use of external consultation in the Irish public service, not only the preceding analysis in this paper is drawn upon but reference is also made to some key guidance sources identifying best practice approaches to consultation<sup>27</sup>. Public service managers may well find reference to such key resource documents valuable in seeking to move forward in an effective manner within their own organisations.

### 8.2.1 *Effective consultation involves commitments*

The Audit Commission for England and Wales (1999) has defined ‘consultation’ as ‘a process of dialogue that leads to a decision’. This working definition identifies a number of important commitments in relation to effective consultation with the external customer that this review of national and international good practice would support. These commitments are:

1. *Consultation needs to be a dialogue* between parties and not an explicitly or implicitly one-way communication. The notion of consultation being a dialogue implies an on-going exchange of views and information, rather than a one-off event. Dialogue also

implies two or more parties not just hearing but listening to and taking account of one another's views.

2. *Consultation needs to be meaningful.* There appears to be little point in consulting over policies or services for the sake of it when no related action is to be taken. Such consultation can become discredited as simply 'going through the motions for the sake of it'. Such 'consultation' reflects badly on the organisation and may be damaging for future business relationships.
3. As a consequence, *consultation needs to be decision orientated.* Such decisions may be high or low level. However, it is also important, throughout the consultation process, to make clear that the outcome of consultation becomes an input to decision making. Many other factors, external to the consultation process itself, may also need to be taken into account before a final decision is taken. Feedback to those consulted regarding decisions taken can be helpful in this process.

Delivery of effective systems for customer consultation, therefore, requires a commitment to meaningful dialogue and to decision making and/or action taking following that consultation. Consultation requires long-term commitment to a process of continuous change and adaptation, not just a one-off event of token value.

### 8.2.2 *Some qualities of effective consultation*

To be effective, and to allow public servants to move forward constructively, consultation also needs to possess a number of key qualities:

- *Consultation needs to be planned.* This involves deciding on what to consult about, when to consult, who to consult and how to consult. It may involve consulting jointly with other bodies. It should certainly be informed by a strategic approach and adopt a mode of consultation appropriate to answering the what, why, when, who and how questions.
- *Potential challenges in relation to effective consultation will need to be identified and managed successfully.* Such managerial challenges can include financial cost. It is also important to ensure effective management and interaction between the political and official domains, as well as recognising and acting to address the equality/diversity dimensions to proposed consultation. The expectations of those being consulted also need to be managed effectively. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointing outcomes no matter how extensive the consultation exercise itself.

It would be valuable, therefore, in terms of helping inform future initiatives in this area within the Irish public service to discuss further the types of issues that need to be addressed when organisations are moving forward.

### 8.3 Planning effective consultation

In the early stages of planning an effective external consultation exercise, public service managers need to develop clear understandings of, and find satisfactory answers to, the following questions:

- What are they consulting about and why?
- Who should be consulted and when?
- How should they consult?

Answers to the why, what, when, who and how questions are, of course, inter-related and inter-dependent. In answering the why and what questions, the answers to when, who and how will become clearer. In addition, it is clear, from the analysis and discussion of good practice earlier in this discussion paper, that effective internal consultation is an essential prerequisite for effective external consultation. Effective engagement with the internal customer will not only help in identifying the right questions to ask, but will also assist greatly in operationalising the consultative approach itself, as well as in understanding and acting upon the consultation outcomes.

#### 8.3.1 Purpose for consultation

In deciding what to consult about, it is vitally important at the outset to identify any cross- or intra-organisational priorities that may exist. For example, in some areas such as planning and development, there may be a statutory or procedural requirement to consult. More usually, the purpose of the consultation is more discretionary in character. In such circumstances, it may be important for organisations embarking upon such consultations for the first time to prioritise issues that, for example, have implications which are corporate in character and go beyond the specific concerns of an individual business unit.<sup>28</sup> Such issues could include the following types of situation:

- Major policy decisions or policy development initiatives where the views of stakeholders are not known and/or require further definition.
- New policy, service delivery or regulatory initiatives where the same situation applies.
- Controversial decisions, perhaps where there are to be major changes in service delivery, where there would be little merit in evading public consultation in the longer-term but on the contrary something positive to be gained by being pro-active.
- Areas of policy and/or service delivery or regulation that are regarded by external and/or internal customers as requiring improvement and/or alteration.
- Areas that account for a significant proportion of organisational budget.

In addition, at this early planning stage, it would be important to identify what relevant informational resources may already be available and whether or not other agencies should, and could, become jointly involved in the consultation. Information sharing between, and within, public service bodies can help identify those areas where previous relevant consultation has not already taken place. It can also enhance the credibility of the consultation amongst those to be consulted. Good information is an important pre-requisite for effective consultation.

Finally, in seeking to identify and determine priorities for consultation, there may be areas where consultation may not be appropriate at a particular point in time. For example, if a firm decision has already been reached on the policy, service delivery or regulatory issue concerned, then engagement on consultation is likely to be wasteful of resources and encourage cynicism amongst the customer base. Such an outcome would probably impact negatively on future consultations.

### *8.3.2 Consultation with whom*

Having resolved issues of prioritisation and made the decision to consult, questions then naturally arise as to who should be consulted. There are clearly a wide spectrum of potential policy development, service delivery and regulatory decisions that could be beneficially influenced by consultation but it is important to tailor the consultative approach to best fit with those to be consulted. A number of examples could be illustrative here:

- Decisions that may affect comparatively few people, and/or are concerned with detailed issues, are probably the most amenable to a focused consultation with small groups. Such groups would typically comprise those with most experience of and/or are most affected potentially by the changes envisaged.
- Some decisions may be more complex and multi-faceted in character, affecting a larger number of groups of people. For example, changes in a regulatory regime or in relation to service plans would benefit from consultation with a wider range of groups and key stakeholders.
- Decisions potentially impacting directly upon larger populations are most likely to require consultative approaches that will seek to identify the views/needs of as representative a cross-section of customers as possible.

Identifying the right groups and/or populations for consultation is not always straightforward. For example, the extent to which representative groups fully reflect the diversity of the populations they purport to represent can be uncertain. In such situations, it may be appropriate to supplement information coming from group consultations by undertaking

focus groups discussions or a sample survey of the wider population. Likewise, some topics (e.g. in the health, social services or criminal justice areas) can have much wider socio-economic implications than just for those most immediately affected at that point in time.

### *8.3.3 Consultation timing*

Good practice also indicates that the undertaking of a consultation exercise needs to be timely. Needless to say, it should not be undertaken too late in the course of policy development, service delivery planning or regulatory reform if it is to have a meaningful impact upon the changes envisaged. Likewise, it should inform but not unnecessarily delay the decision making. Consultation is, however, time consuming compared to a more traditional directive approach. The benefits come from improved decision making and a greater possibility of ownership by those for whom the services are being delivered or the policies developed.

The precise timing of a consultative process depends on local circumstances. For example, in some cases, consultation may be appropriate at the development, implementation, monitoring and/or evaluation stages of an initiative. In other cases, consultation is best timed to inform thinking ahead of formulating future initiatives. Timing can also be affected by whether or not the consultation is to be undertaken solely by one public body or by a number of agencies. Consultation plans need to consider services as they affect the customer and not just as they affect those who provide them. Cross-agency consultation is often appropriate from the customer's point of view but does raise challenges, including timing, for the public bodies involved. However, such collaborative exercises can be very helpful in identifying and implementing more holistic solutions.

### *8.3.4 Consultation methods*

The review of national and international good practice undertaken in this research has identified a wide range of different methods of consultation, ranging from comment cards and once-off local level customer surveys, public meetings or focus groups, through customer panels and a wide-range of consultative fora, to large-scale regular or periodic national surveys, used for benchmarking purposes. The best methods of consultation to be employed by a public service body depend upon a wide range of factors including:

- the purpose of the consultation
- the frequency with which it would need to be undertaken
- the characteristics of those to be consulted
- the time constraints on the exercise and
- financial considerations.

Given this multiplicity of factors, good practice indicates the need to adopt whatever approach best fits the particular situation. In addition, public service managers in reaching their decision need to be cognisant of emerging methodologies and their potential applicability to their own changing situation. For example, less traditional but more innovative approaches such as web and/or ICT-based consultations, deliberative conferences/fora, citizens' juries and panels, all have valuable potential contributions to make in obtaining informed feedback from external customers.

Whatever method is used, it must always be fit for purpose. For example, while traditional techniques, like questionnaire surveys, can be valuable in a variety of circumstances they are often not as helpful on technical or complex issues. Questionnaire surveys may not equip the respondent with the necessary information to make a meaningful response. In contrast, participation in customer panels or citizens' juries can overcome this problem. However, it must also be borne in mind that a technique is not necessarily better simply because it is new or apparently sophisticated. Simple approaches can often also be appropriate. What really counts is deriving an optimal fit between the methods used and the purpose of the consultation exercise itself, while carrying out the exercise professionally and with commitment to acting upon outcomes.

#### **8.4 Managing effective consultation**

Managing an effective consultation process requires attention and action in relation to all the issues identified so far. In addition, there are additional management issues in relation to external consultation that deserve further discussion. These additional issues relate to the interface with the political domain, ensuring representative feedback, consulting on controversial issues, financial cost and the management of diversity.

##### *8.4.1 Political representation*

Elected representatives at national and local levels traditionally see themselves as representing the voice of the people. Through their day-to-day contact with their constituents and their problems, they play a vital representational and advocacy role on behalf of many customers of public bodies. Direct consultation by public bodies, unless carefully managed, can be seen as undermining the role of such public representatives.

At local government level, such issues can be addressed by the involvement of councillors in the design and even implementation of the consultation, as long as such involvement does not bias the participation of customers in public meetings for example. If the consultation is particularly controversial, then the involvement of elected members in this way can be

beneficial. Even when not directly involved, elected representatives at national and local levels can certainly benefit from the information and first-hand opinions of the public that arise from effectively managed consultations.

#### *8.4.2 Unrepresentative consultation and consulting on controversial issues*

Effective external consultation relies for its validity and utility upon reflecting, in as representative manner as possible, the views and/or needs of the customer base concerned. Poorly designed or executed consultation exercises can be damaging if they result in bad decision making. For example, if the staff undertaking consultation lack appropriate knowledge and skills, mistakes can be made that undermine the value of the exercise.

In this regard, some consultative techniques are more prone to unrepresentative response than others. However, any particular technique no matter how appropriate to the issue can result in skewed responses if inappropriately applied. A number of different types of example can illustrate this point.

- Surveys can be carried out when inappropriate to the subject matter. They may be designed inappropriately, asking questions that precondition particular responses. The sampling approach may be unreliable and inappropriate inferences made from the data returned. The subsequent analysis may not be competent and result in the provision of poor information as an input to the decision-making process. These problems can be overcome by the use of professionally qualified and trained staff internally or by outsourcing. However, even when outsourcing, it is important that the internal project management team is sufficiently competent to ensure quality assurance.
- Consultative fora, like public meetings, can too easily be dominated by particular interest groups and/or individuals. While articulate or disruptive individuals and groups will always present management challenges, it is important not to employ techniques which allow them to dominate the process and deny others their voice. Representative sampling techniques to select participants can be helpful here as well as the effective use of chairing skills in meetings.

Such difficulties can become particularly acute when consulting on controversial issues, such as the closure of public facilities or the local opening of accommodation for special needs groups. While public meetings may have a role in allowing expression to public concerns, participative and deliberative techniques (such as citizens juries) are more likely to provide more considered and useable feedback. Faced with such an issue, it may be helpful to consult in advance with concerned groups in order to seek a consensus, if possible, on the proposed methodology.

#### 8.4.3 *Financial costs*

Clearly the direct costs associated with effective customer consultation vary according to the scale and character of the approach adopted. Large-scale, national questionnaire surveys have considerably more associated costs than small-scale focus groups or on-going consultative fora. Gross cost, is however, only one important financial consideration. In seeking to achieve an optimal balance between available resources and deciding the most appropriate form of consultation, it also needs to be borne in mind that effective consultation can deliver:

- direct savings by identifying services that are no longer effective or efficient
- maximised take-up of services that may have been expensive to develop and/or for which charges may be made
- better designed services which minimise complaints and their associated administrative costs
- better and more cost-effective forward planning for service provision and regulatory reform, as well as
- improved retention and motivation of staff through enhanced service provision.

Net costs to individual public bodies can be reduced by sharing costs between agencies when appropriate. Likewise, it may be possible by using direct community involvement to both enhance local ownership and minimise support costs. The main question to address for many organisations seeking to deliver effective policies, quality services and to reduce red tape is: can we afford not to consult?

#### 8.4.4 *Managing diversity*

Finally, it has been evident from the review of national and international good practice in relation to external consultation that public service bodies have diverse customer bases. *Effective consultation is inclusive consultation.* While this is an extremely important topic, the diversity of groups covered by Irish public service bodies makes it difficult, within the context of this discussion paper to give this particular issue sufficient attention. Public service bodies in Ireland are aware and need to act upon their responsibilities as service providers set out in the Equal Status Act (2000). But, in addition to the nine grounds covered by the legislation, many groups in society are easier to reach than others when it comes to consultation. A responsibility rests with the public body to seek to ensure that the feed-back it receives from consultative exercises is as representative as possible of those it is seeking to consult.

A number of different groups of people can be more difficult to consult than others in society. Such groups include those:

- with language and/or literacy difficulties
- such as single working parents, who may be very time constrained
- people who are geographically or culturally isolated
- people without a permanent address
- people who may feel alienated from, or suspicious of, the public body undertaking the consultation.

Ease of consultation can often also vary by topic. For example on questions of personal health, men can be more reluctant to express their views than women. Varying the approach to consultation to seek proactively to include as many as possible of such groups will add greatly to the validity of the exercise itself and its outcome.

## **8.5 Concluding remarks**

In moving forward to consult effectively with their customer bases, public service bodies need to ask themselves, and answer satisfactorily, the important what, why, who, when and how questions discussed in this part of the study. The analysis of international and national good practice identified in this discussion paper gives testimony to the rich diversity of responses that public service bodies have made, and can make, in responding to these challenging questions. While the focus of this discussion paper has been explicitly upon effective consultation with the external customer in the delivery of services and the development of policy and better regulation, it should not be forgotten that consultation is only one of many forms of potential engagement. The review of international evidence contained in this paper suggests that there is a spectrum of different levels of engagement from the provision of quality information, through effective consultation to active participation by customers/citizens in the development, monitoring, evaluation and delivery of policies, services and regulations. However, there is little doubt that effective consultation is central to the quality-management of public services. Nonetheless, it is useful to recognise that

Too often in the past, the road to participation has been paved with good intentions only to lead up time consuming and wasteful dead-ends which result in disillusionment and resentment for all concerned. Participation, like democracy, has meant many things to many people. The opportunities for participation are there to be

grasped but only if all those involved have a common understanding and share a common language (Wilcox 1994).

Through the Irish Government's QCS Initiative, through the drive for quality management and the increasing use of networks to share experience of successful approaches, there is now much greater scope in the Irish public service for effective consultation with the customers that the service has been established to serve. Organisations may rightly hesitate before embarking upon such consultation for the first time. However, as never before, there is a growing body of experience within the public service, both nationally and internationally, to inform good practice and give practical support to public service managers seeking meaningful consultation to inform effective action. In this regard, this discussion paper should prove helpful.

## **Annex One**

### **Guiding Principles for Customer Service Action Plans**

In July 2000, following work undertaken on its behalf by the QCS Working Group, the government agreed a new set of Guiding Principles for Departments and Offices to use in preparing and implementing their second round of Customer Action Plans (CAPs). To assist in the preparation of these Plans, Guidance Notes were published (see Department of the Taoiseach 2001a). These notes are additional to and supplement those provided (see Guidelines on Planning for Quality Customer Service 1997). The new Principles are:

1. *Quality Service Standards*

Publish a statement that outlines the nature and quality of service which customers can expect, and display it prominently at the point of service delivery.

2. *Equality/Diversity*

Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and accommodate diversity, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by the equality legislation (under the grounds of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community).

Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and for those facing geographic barriers to services.

3. *Physical Access*

Provide clean, accessible public offices, which ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and, as part of this, facilitate access for people with disabilities and others with specific needs.

4. *Information*

Take a pro-active approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Ensure that the potential offered by Information Technology is fully availed of and that the information available on public service websites follows the guidelines on web publication. Continue to drive for simplification of rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.

5. *Timeliness and Courtesy*

Deliver quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay, fostering a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer. Give contact names in all communications to ensure ease of ongoing transactions.

6. *Complaints*

Maintain a well publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with complaints about the quality of service provided.

7. *Appeals*

Similarly, maintain a formalised, well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of appeal/review for customers who are dissatisfied with decisions in relation to services.

8. *Consultation and Evaluation*

Provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services. Ensure meaningful evaluation of service delivery.

9. *Choice*

Provide choice, where feasible, in service delivery including payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times. Use available and emerging technologies to ensure maximum access and choice, and quality of delivery.

10. *Official Languages Equality*

Provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their rights to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.

11. *Better Co-ordination*

Foster a more co-ordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public services.

12. *Internal Customer*

Ensure staff are recognised as internal customers and that they are properly supported and consulted with regard to service delivery issues.

**Annex Two**  
**The Consultative Framework and Issues Emerging from the Preparation of**  
**Quality and Fairness**  
**Extract from Department of Health and Children (2001)**

**2. Background**

The Minister for Health and Children decided to consult widely in preparing the Health Strategy. Colgan and Associates were appointed as consultants in February 2001 to design, plan, implement and report on the consultation programme. The main objective of the consultation process was to gather the views of members of the public, service users, service providers, staff and management of the health services and to channel these views into the development of the Health Strategy. A separate report providing full details of the consultation and its findings, *Your Views about Health*, is available from the Department of Health and Children.

**2. Structures for preparing the new Strategy**

A number of structures were set up to prepare the new Strategy. The preparation was overseen by a Steering Group representing the Department of Health and Children, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Finance and the health boards. The Steering Group had overall responsibility for the consultation process. A project team comprising officials of the Department of Health and Children and the health boards was established to work to the Steering Group and produce the Strategy document. The Minister established a National Health Strategy Consultative Forum representative of key stakeholders to support the Steering Group by providing advice on the key themes and direction of the Strategy and on the process for its preparation. It proved to be a valuable means of discussion that underpinned the entire consultation process. In addition to the plenary sessions, the Forum was divided into eight working groups to deal with specific issues: funding, eligibility, delivery systems/human resources, population health, quality, voluntary/statutory interface, e-health and futures in health care.

**3. Consulting the stakeholders**

*3.1 The public*

In view of restrictions on travel in the early part of 2001 due to foot-and-mouth disease, the main means of consulting with the general public was through the consultation pack, *Your*

Views about Health. Members of the public and organisations were invited, by means of a questionnaire, to describe their experiences of the health services and to give their views on future change. Over 1,500 submissions were received from members of the public. The Department of Health and Children also commissioned Irish Marketing Surveys to carry out market research. This research included a quantitative and qualitative survey involving a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults.

### *3.2 Organisations*

A number of organisations participated in the process by completing the questionnaire Your Views about Health, referred to above. Others submitted independent submissions setting out their views in detail. A number of health boards arranged workshops for locally-based organisations. Over 300 submissions were received from organisations.

### *3.3 Health services personnel*

Extensive and detailed consultation was undertaken in each of the ten health board areas. In addition, a number of health services staff completed the questionnaire Your Views about Health. Consultation also took place with staff in the Department of Health and Children.

### *3.4 People living in poverty*

In the case of people living in poverty, a separate consultation process was undertaken through the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS).

### *3.5 Links with the development of the Strategy*

The material contained in the questionnaires and in submissions fed into the process of developing the Strategy in a number of ways:

- The material was read and indexed and made available to the relevant working groups involved in developing the Strategy.
- Reports on the content were prepared for the Steering Group.
- An overview of the findings was presented to the National Consultative Forum in July, 2001.

## **4. Key themes emerging from the consultation process**

### *4.1 A whole-system approach to health*

High priority is given to the promotion of health and prevention of illness in a way that empowers individuals and communities to take responsibility for their lives and their health and which provides the supports they need for that task. There is consensus that health promotion must be viewed broadly, encompassing education, housing, income support,

provision for leisure, mental health, as well as complex structural issues such as poverty and marginalisation. The feedback also underscores the strategic and long-term benefits of giving children and young people the information, facilities and supports needed to optimise their health and well-being.

#### *4.2 Going beyond 'more'*

The need for more investment at all levels is a theme that emerges throughout the consultation process. Linked with this need for more resources, however, is the need for strategic change around how the health system is experienced by the public. The changes envisaged centre on fairness, equity of access, quality of care and quality of people's experiences of the health system, and the provision of holistic and seamless services.

#### *4.3 Towards a holistic and seamless service*

A strong strategic focus is on a health system that is responsive to the whole person and his or her well-being. Such a system envisages full integration of services that place the person at its centre. There is a clear understanding that existing system rigidities – in attitudes, contractual arrangements, service delivery systems and boundaries between agencies and funding mechanisms – must be addressed if the new person-centred ethos is to permeate the health system.

#### *4.4 A focus on community*

There is a strong focus on providing care in the community. There are numerous proposals for developing a new model for delivering health care in the community, the availability of a wider range of services, developing the role of the general practitioner, and improved linkages within and between services.

The focus on community is strongly evident in the priority given to providing services in the community to vulnerable groups such as older people and people with disabilities. The need for rural transport is highlighted constantly.

#### *4.5 A fair health system*

One of the key findings from the consultation process is that there is a strong will to change what is perceived to be an inequitable system, particularly in the case of access to hospital treatment and specialist care. There is also concern about geographic disparities and access to services for vulnerable and/or marginalized groups such as older people, people with mental health difficulties, the homeless and ethnic minorities.

#### *4.6 Delivering high quality of care, treatment and support*

The future development of the health system must place a very high premium on the quality of service provided.

#### *4.7 Respectful relationships*

The theme of respectful relationships is evident in the consultation process. Reported experiences of disrespect or poor communication make a strong and lasting impression. Strategies to address this issue include increasing staffing levels so as to remove some of the pressure on staff, training and development programmes for health service personnel in customer services, effective complaints and appeals procedures, anti-ageism, disability awareness programmes and culturally sensitive information services and practices.

There are two significant strands to this theme. One is mutual respect in the relationships between the groups who make up the health system – service providers, users, advocacy groups, policy makers, funders, staff and employers. The second is the need to support the staff in the health services through a human resources strategy that would place a high priority on promoting the well-being of health service personnel.

Full details of the messages from the consultation process are contained in the report on consultation *Your Views about Health*.

## Notes

1. The Equal Status Act (2000) prohibits discrimination in the provision of goods and services on nine grounds: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religious belief, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community. This research has the following objectives:

- Identify the key functions within an organisation that shape approaches to quality customer service.
- Explore instances of effective practice within Ireland in incorporating a focus on equality/diversity within each of these key functions as they relate to quality customer service.
- Identify examples of current best practice in this area and other jurisdictions.
- Highlight challenges and practical difficulties in the application of the new equality/diversity principle.
- Identify initiatives that could be taken to apply the new equality/diversity principle in practice.

The work was completed in December 2001 (see Pillinger 2001a, forthcoming).

2. The following are the terms of reference for this new CPMR study:

- Review and evaluate national/international documentary material identifying and discussing the key issues to be addressed in the effective implementation of an internal customer service ethos.
- Consult with key personnel in the public service and other agencies to identify examples of good practice in Ireland and overseas.
- Explore the implications of different approaches to the effective introduction of an internal customer service ethos through in-depth discussion in a selected number of public service bodies
- Identify and discuss key issues to be addressed by public service bodies to facilitate wider adoption.

3 In 1997, research undertaken by Irish Marketing Surveys (IMS), on behalf of the Department of the Taoiseach found that, while one-third of Irish adults had been in contact with one civil service department/office or other over the previous year, over 90 per cent of such contacts had been with these three organisations.

4. The public service in Ireland does not include those publicly owned companies that provide marketed goods and services and such organisations are not included in the scope of this paper. A further 50,000 staff are employed in such commercial state companies providing, for example, transport and energy goods and service (see Humphreys and Gorman, 1987 and Humphreys, 1983).

5. A major independent evaluation of the modernisation programme as it relates to the civil service has just been completed by P.A. Consulting (2002). Progress has been assessed in relation to:
  - Statements of Strategy
  - Openness, transparency and accountability
  - Regulatory reform
  - Financial management
  - Business planning
  - Quality customer service
  - Human resource management and
  - Information systems management.

The results from this evaluation will inform the next phase in the development and implementation of the modernisation programme.

6. An external study has also been commissioned to assess the effectiveness of partnership arrangements and structures at the organisational level for involving staff in change and in developing a new participative approach to resolving issues and challenges more generally.
7. For a critical assessment of the overall reform programme in Australia, within a comparative international context, see Meek (2001).
8. Since 1994, public administration units have participated in the Finnish Quality Award competition. In 2001, a special public administration class has been opened and the competition is based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model instead of the present Finnish Quality Award model which is based on Malcolm Baldrige Criteria. To reinforce the transformation, the Ministry of Finance launched a two-year project called 'National Quality Initiative 2000-2001' in February 2000. The aim of the Initiative is to enhance the use of EFQM Excellence Model and Service Charters among public sector organisations. Thirty organisations from all public sector levels are participating in the initiative.
9. The role of these test panels is to assess the likely administrative consequences for enterprises of proposed new legislation or executive orders. The test panels represent 1500 enterprises divided into 500 businesses each. These test panels supplement but do not substitute for normal public consultation with business organisations as part of the legislative process. If a proposed Bill or Executive Order is likely to impact upon a comparatively small number of businesses then focus groups may be used together with telephone interviews.
10. A number of good specific examples of such initiatives in the area of social public services are cited by Pillinger (2001b). For example, in the municipality of Vejle, quality experiments in the care of the elderly used user questionnaires, consultations with the

elderly persons' council and open meetings with user groups in order to identify concrete objectives for enhanced service delivery.

11. The 'Hear the Citizens' project has been launched as part of a central government initiative to increase consultation and participation. As well as civil servants themselves, over 130 citizen organisations were consulted regarding existing and preferred consultative arrangements. Policy responses are now being developed (see OECD 2001d).
12. For example, service charters have been a core method of improving the quality of public services in Finland. A charter approach was introduced into public policy in 1997. The impetus for the introduction of service charters is the need for cost savings in the public sector as 'bad-quality services tend to be more expensive than high-quality services.' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen 1998). The key ideas underpinning service charters are: (a) promises to the service users to produce quality; (b) flexible and customer-centred approach to service provision; (c) customer feedback and the correction of errors; (d) description of the service in a service specification and (e) producing the best possible service efficiently. Compensation mechanisms have been included in service charters by several city departments in Finland and compensation varies from financial compensation to discounts being granted if a service is not provided within the timeframe promised.
13. These councils included the London Borough of Lewisham, Knowsley, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council and West Sussex County Council. For further details see <http://www.idea.gov.uk/beacons/round2.htm>.
14. For details of the People's Panel and its history see <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/pphome.htm>.
15. Also used in Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the USA, Citizens' Juries involve ordinary citizens with no special 'axe to grind'. They are usually commissioned by an organisation which has power to act on their recommendation. Between twelve and sixteen jurors are recruited, using a combination of random and stratified sampling, to be broadly representative of their community. Their task is to address an important question about policy or planning. They are brought together for four days, with a team of two moderators. They are fully briefed about the background to the question, through written information and evidence from witnesses. Jurors scrutinise the information, cross-examine the witnesses and discuss different aspects of the problem in small groups and plenary sessions. Their conclusions are compiled in a report which is returned to the jurors for their approval before being submitted to the commissioning authority. The jury's verdict need not be unanimous nor is it binding. However, the commissioning authority is required to publicise the jury and its findings, to respond within a set time and either to follow its recommendations or to explain publicly why not (see Coote and Lenaghan 1997 and Humphreys 1998).

16. In accordance with good practice, as well as to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Equal Status Act 2000, a Support Pack on the Equality/Diversity Aspects of Quality Customer Service for the Civil and Public Service (2001) has been developed by the QCS Working Group. This pack rightly asserts that ‘People are different from one another in many ways – language, culture, age, gender, family status, sexual orientation, marital status, religion, race and disability ... To deliver a quality customer service, these differences must first be acknowledged and understood. But most importantly they must be appreciated and valued ... Consulting with representative organisations and their networks is an effective way of including groups experiencing inequalities’ (Sections 2.5/6).
17. To avoid overlap, this brief overview does not include specific reference to those departments/offices that are discussed in more detail later: namely the Department of Social Community and Family Affairs and the Department of Health and Children.
18. References to all the departmental Customer Service Action Plans (2001-2004) available at the end of 2001 and, therefore, included in this assessment are listed in the bibliography at the end of this discussion paper.
19. The first phase of the Customer Care Research undertaken for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is available at <http://www.entemp.ie/custcare01.pdf>. The benchmark study for the Department of Public Enterprise is at <http://www.irlgov.ie/tec/qcs/benchmark.htm>
20. Revenue has previously undertaken two major customer surveys, in 1994 and 1995, dealing with general taxpayers and business respectively. In addition, smaller scale surveys have been undertaken on a need to know basis.
21. For details of this process of organisational transformation see Humphreys et al 1999 (CPMR Discussion Paper No. 11).
22. For example, in the 1980s, there were four large employment exchanges serving the Dublin region, all of which were located in the city centre. Today, in the same region, there are nearly twenty local offices situated in a number of suburban areas including neighbourhood shopping centres.
23. Within the Aireacht, the Planning Division is responsible for the formulation of social protection and other social support policies, as well as the provision of advice and support to the Minister. The other part of the Aireacht provides corporate services to the department, such as personnel, finance, facilities management and internal audit.
24. The SWS is the executive arm of the department and is responsible for the day-to-day administration and management of social welfare schemes and services through a network of local, regional and decentralised offices. The delivery of services is structured through its network of ten regional offices in Cork, Dublin (three offices), Dundalk, Galway, Limerick, Longford, Sligo and Waterford. Within this regional structure there are sixty-nine branch offices (SWBOs) and fifty-eight local offices (SWLOs). In addition

to Dublin, head office staff are located in Dundalk, Letterkenny, Longford, Sligo and Waterford.

25. The DSCFA's gross estimated expenditure for 2001 was €7.75 billion and, in the previous year, it is estimated that €272 million was saved to the Exchequer from the department's control activities.
26. For the purpose of the new system, a complaint is defined as 'an expression of dissatisfaction, measurable by reference to service standards and requiring a response' (DSCFA 2002b).
27. These key references sources include Barker (2001), Cabinet Office 1998 and 2000, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA 1998), Department of Health (1999), Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (1998), Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (2002c), Local Government Information Unit (1999) and Wilcox (1994).
28. That of course does not mean that cross-organisational priorities do not emerge at the business unit level. Recent examples of such a phenomenon would include the need to respond to rapid increases in demand, e.g. in relation to asylum seekers or for work permits.

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