

Raising Quality Standards in the Irish Public Service

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Drawing upon a number of recently completed research studies, as well as on-going work, this paper examines efforts that are being made in Ireland to improve the quality standards of services delivered to the citizen. It is shown, that in order to encourage and support innovation and a commitment to quality services in the public sector, the Irish experience has indicated the need for a national strategy with supporting structures to underpin and help drive forward the continuous improvement of quality public services. In the Irish case, this approach has included specific initiatives in relation to strategic planning including Strategy Statements, Annual Progress Reports, Customer Action Plans and Business Plans. It has required fundamental organisational re-structuring in order to mainstream quality customer service values throughout the organisation's business processes. This has often been facilitated by the effective use of information and communication technologies.

Raktažodžiai: *viešoji tarnyba, viešosios paslaugos, kokybės standartai, strateginis planavimas.*
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Introduction

In Ireland, as elsewhere throughout Europe, quality public services have a vital role to play in creating and sustaining the necessary environment for economic growth and social progress. For the past 9 years, the Irish public service has been undergoing a major programme of reform in part at least to enable it to keep pace with, and support, wider socio-economic changes. This programme is frequently referred to as the *Strategic Management Initiative* (SMI).

From the citizen/customer's viewpoint, the public service's ability to raise quality standards is the key test of the success of the SMI. While some parts of the public service have been slow to adapt, others have been in the forefront of organisational change to improve the quality of services delivered. Such organisations have pioneered innovative approaches to citizen and staff engagement and been effective in the exploitation of opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Drawing upon a number of recently completed research studies, as well as on-going work, this paper examines efforts that are being made in Ireland to improve the

quality standards of services delivered to the citizen/customer (see Humphreys, 1998 & 2002; Humphreys, Fleming & O'Donnell, 1999; Humphreys, Butler & O'Donnell, 2001; O'Riordan & Humphreys, 2003 and Timonen, O'Donnell and Humphreys, 2003). These research studies were undertaken on behalf of the Committee for Public Management Research (CPMR) and are available to download from the CPMR website at <http://www.cpmr.gov.ie/>

The Size and Scope of the Irish Public Sector

Before commencing a more in-depth discussion of the SMI, and in particular its focus on raising quality standards in public services, it is important to have an appreciation of the size and scope of the Irish public sector. In summary, the Irish public sector currently employs over 323,000 full and part-time staff. These staff are directly and/or indirectly engaged in the provision of a wide range of services that are essential for the economic and social progress of the country. 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 regulatory, developmental, infrastructural, energy, advisory and other services provided by both commercial and non-commercial state-sponsored bodies. Quite apart from the national, regional and local significance of the services provided, it is also important to note that the public sector employs approximately 20% of those at work

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in non-agri-cultural economic activity in the country as a whole. Public sector pay and pensions account for approximately 9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (*Public Service Benchmarking Body*, 2002).

As a small, open economy, active membership of the European Union (EU) has been a very important and positive factor in helping to bring Ireland to its current position, as one of the most successful economies within the EU. Ireland's recent economic prosperity represents a significant transformation from a very different past and the Irish public service has played a key role in this process of national recovery and transformation. It is within this context that it is absolutely vital to Ireland's continued social and economic well being that the services delivered by public bodies are of the highest quality. In this way, we have been able to learn from the successes and mistakes made by other countries. For similar reasons, and despite their different and diverse situations, countries in Central and Eastern Europe may be interested to learn more about Irish experiences.

Policy Framework for the Improvement of Quality Customer Service

Since 1994, the Irish public service has been engaged upon a major modernisation programme covering not just the area of Quality Customer Service (QCS), but also new accountability arrangements for public service bodies, improved human resource and financial management, as well as information technology. In summary, the key aims of the SMI have been (a) providing an excellent service to the public, (b) contributing to national development and (c) making the most efficient and effective use of resources. Because of its direct relevance to each of these aims, it is not surprising that one of the fundamental objectives of the national policy change agenda has been the "achievement of an excellent service for the Government and for the public as customers and clients at all levels" (*Delivering Better Government*, 1996). A very similar objective has been stated with equal force for the SMI at the local government level.

An Improved Strategic Planning and Accountability Framework

Since 1996, there have been a number of major legislative and administrative initiatives that have served to underpin efforts to improve the quality of public services developed. Such initiatives include the *Freedom of Information Act* (1997) and the *Public Service Management Act* (1997). As a result of the latter legislation, all Civil Service departments and offices are required to publish three-year *Strategy Statements*, which include explicit goals and high-level objectives (with associated performance indi-

cators) that link with specific commitments to enhance the quality of services they deliver (see Boyle and Fleming, 2000). *Annual Progress Reports* are made to the Oireachtas (National Parliament) (see Boyle, 2001) and annual *Business Plans* prepared at individual Unit level to reflect and operationalise the department/office's strategic level objectives.

A similar approach has also been adopted at local government level as part of the SMI. Since 1996, local authorities have been required to develop *Strategy Statements* (Corporate Plans). Published in December 1996, *Better Local Government* (BLG) established a major programme of local authority reform. On the question of customer service specifically, BLG (1996) stresses, "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". *Modernising Government – the Challenge for Local Government* (2000) recognises that delivering quality customer services is at the heart of the current reform programme. Accordingly, it launched a range of Service Indicators for each local authority, which will help individual authority's benchmark their performance against others. Progress against this common set of indicators is reported in *Annual Reports*.

The Quality Customer Service (QCS) Initiative

Internationally, governments have been striving for a number of decades now to achieve significant improvements in the quality of public services provided often as a core component of wider reform programmes (see: OECD, 1996; Pollitt and Bouckhaert, 1995). Similarly, the provision of quality services by public bodies to the wide range of customers they serve is at the heart of the current programme of public service reform in Ireland. *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. Indeed, given the significance of the services delivered by public bodies to the economic and social well-being of the nation, it has been argued that the SMI's ability to deliver significantly improved services to the citizens that ultimately pay for, and use, those services will be a litmus test for the success or otherwise of the SMI as a whole. Equally, failure in this area could undermine fundamentally external perceptions of the capacity and competence of the public service in Ireland.

As part of the SMI Programme, in May 1997, a specific QCS Initiative was launched to promote the

wider and more co-ordinated adoption of improved customer service standards by civil service departments. Initially, each department was required to produce a two-year *Customer Action Plan* indicating how they intended to improve the delivery of quality customer service in the areas for which they were responsible. However, having reviewed the progress made, the Government established a new high-level QCS Working Group in autumn 1999 which made a number of key recommendations to Government, which were adopted in July 2000. These recommendations included the requirement that, from the beginning of 2001, each civil service department is required to produce a new *Customer Action Plan*, which addresses a number of key issues. In summary, each department/office has to:

1. Ensure staff are recognised as internal customers and are properly supported and consulted with regard to service delivery issues.
2. Take a pro-active approach to providing clear, timely and accurate information that is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Continue to simplify rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.
3. Publish and display QCS standards that outline the nature and quality of service that external customers can expect.
4. Deliver quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay, within a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer.
5. Provide clean and accessible public offices, which ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and facilitate access for people with specific needs.
6. Where feasible, provide choice in service delivery in terms of 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.
7. Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and accommodate diversity, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by that legislation. Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, as well as those facing geographic barriers to services.
8. 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.
9. 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.

10. Foster a more co-ordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public service.
11. Maintain a well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with complaints about the quality of service provided.
12. 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.

Most departments publish their Plans on the web and these may be accessed through the government portal at www.irlgov.ie. Most recently, all Departments/Offices are required to publish a *Charter Statement of Service Standards*. In addition, some departments have developed *Internal Customer Service Action Plans* to support the drive for improved quality of external services (see O’Riordan and Humphreys, 2003). Customer Action Plans are also now published across the public service as a whole, including local government.

Effective Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

In taking the QCS Initiative forward, the government has also stressed that best use be made of available and emerging technologies to improve access to information, as well as 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 a Public Service model as a single point of contact for accessing all e-government services. A range of individual sites are currently available focused upon particular services, including social services (www.reach.ie), business (www.basis.ie) and citizen information (www.oasis.gov.ie/).

In addition, on-line services are also currently being provided by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners (www.ros.ie/), the Land Registry and the FÁS (National Employment Service) on-line jobs service (www.fas.ie/). Guidelines have been issued to inform and ensure consistency of standards for departmental websites and standards for departmental web sites have also been developed to inform the development of Customer Action Plans. An SMI website has been launched as a central information and contact point at <http://www.bettergov.ie>, as well as at www.betterregulation.ie.

Commitment to a Partnership Approach

Finally, one of the most distinctive features of the Irish national policy context within which the drive for quality public services has been taken forward relates to the development over the past 20 years of a social partnership model. The OECD (2001) has noted 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”. Since 1987, a series of national partnership agreements have paved the way for the adoption of a consensus approach to addressing a range of economic, social and industrial relations questions.

A recent national pay agreement: the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF, 2000) specifically stressed 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’. To act as an additional incentive, the PPF provided 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 was also made for the establishment of Quality Assurance Groups for each sector, whose remit is to ensure that such performance indicators are sufficiently challenging. Similar commitments are carried forward in *Sustaining Progress* (2003). Progress against specific modernisation targets has also been incorporated into these recent national pay agreements. Oversight of progress against targets is provided by independent Quality Assurance Groups, including representation from the public and private sectors as well as stakeholder groups.

The Role of the Centre

The development and articulation of an appropriate policy framework at national level has served to both support and encourage individual public service organisations in their drive to improve the quality of services delivered. Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell (2001) have noted that engagement of Irish public service bodies in existing international and national quality assurance and accreditation systems to date is still comparatively undeveloped compared

to other EU countries. Such quality systems include the *ISO 9000 series* (<http://www.iso.org/>), the *European Foundation for Quality Management* (www.efqm.org) and the *Common Assessment Framework* (<http://www.eipa.nl/>). While participation by public service bodies in these, as well as national frameworks (such as the *Q-Mark* (<http://www.excellenceireland.ie/>) and *Excellence through People*, is being encouraged, significant change has been slow to take off.

Under the SMI, the strategy that has been adapted to the development and promotion of QCS at the organisational level has deliberately avoided a highly directive top-down, 'one size fits all' approach (see Gaster 1995). Instead, while there has been very active encouragement, guidance and support from the centre, e.g. through the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) for the Civil Service or the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government for local authorities, individual public service bodies develop their own approaches that are best suited to their particular business profile and customer base. Overall, the Irish approach to promoting public service modernisation has avoided the top-down, politically-driven, control approach used more frequently in some other countries, for example in the UK.

Customer satisfaction with public services

There is a growing body of evidence on customer satisfaction with service quality now available upon which to make informed judgements for improved policy development and service delivery. As a consequence of the need for departments/offices, under the QCS Initiative, to engage in ‘meaningful consultation’ with their customers as part of the development, delivery, evaluation and review of services, many organisations across the public sector are becoming more pro-active and effective in seeking the views of their diverse customers bases on satisfaction with the quality of services provided. Methods used range from the use of comment forms, the commissioning of externally undertaken questionnaire surveys, the use of customer panels/focus groups to the establishment of regular consultative meetings with key stakeholders, such as the social partners, community groups, etc. At the organisational level, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has been in the forefront of such efforts, many of which pre-date the QCS Initiative itself. However, most departments/offices are now seeking information on customer satisfaction, often for the first time, and a detailed overview of current practice is provided in Humphreys, 2002.

Due to the often recent advent of such practices, time-series data to assist the monitoring of trends in

citizen/customer satisfaction are, however, less frequently available. At the organisational level, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has undertaken three national-level customer surveys (since 1985) and circa 40 regional/local level surveys, often focusing upon specific services and/or social groups. However, this situation reflects the organisation's unique response to its particular business needs. Of more general relevance to this particular paper are the results from Civil Service-wide surveys of customer satisfaction published by the Department of the Taoiseach (1997 and 2003) and undertaken by Irish Marketing Surveys and Lansdowne Market Research in 1997 and 2002 respectively. While differences in methodology do inhibit the validity of direct comparisons, some interesting results do emerge from these sources. For example, in 1997, 78% of adults that had experienced direct contact with the civil service over the previous 12 months felt that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the quality of service received. The equivalent statistic for 2002 was 79%. For those that had experienced direct contact with the service, the perceived level of efficiency had, however, risen more markedly between the two base dates. In 2002, 76% of respondents regarded the service as being either fairly or very efficient, compared to 72% in 1997.

Although it is difficult to draw detailed lessons from such headline figures, it could be argued that such small changes in satisfaction levels represent a poor return to the public sector given the considerable investment in the QCS Initiative over the intervening period. However, it can more realistically be argued that maintaining such levels of satisfaction, given the rising economic prosperity of the country and rising citizen/customer expectations, represents a significant achievement. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to note that between 1997 and 2002, the level of contact by citizens with the civil service (over the previous 12 months) had dropped from 32% to 28%. Analysis of the departments contacted suggests that this fall can be largely attributed to the buoyant economic conditions that have prevailed more recently and the associated drop in unemployment claimants. Overall, it is interesting to note that the majority of citizen/customers and businesses felt that the civil service had become more customer focused over the past five years.

Some concluding remarks

In 1998, a major Irish 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). There is now a growing body of independent evidence to show that this situation is gradually changing.

In this context, there are a number of significant lessons that can be drawn from the Irish experience to date. In order to encourage and support innovation and a commitment to quality services in the public sector, the Irish experience has indicated the need for a national strategy with supporting structures to underpin and help drive forward the continuous improvement of quality public services. In the Irish case, this approach has included specific initiatives in relation to strategic planning including *Strategy Statements*, *Annual Progress Reports*, *Customer Action Plans* and *Business Plans*. It has required fundamental organisational re-structuring in order to mainstream QCS values throughout the organisation's business processes. This has often been facilitated by the effective use of ICTs. It requires a firm and sustained commitment from the political domain as well as senior management. In Ireland, the social partnership model has played an important role. But, whatever the national approach to addressing these issues, the successful response to the challenge of change will require the encouragement of leadership throughout organisations to champion quality services. Quality frameworks can certainly play an important role but that role has been limited in Ireland to date. Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from Irish experience is that no one size fits all. Each administration, at national and local levels, needs to be able to draw upon the experiences of others to help in developing its own solutions not copycat others. In that way, innovation can flourish.

The pursuit of economic prosperity and social progress has been a very important driver for public sector modernisation in Ireland, just as in turn, improving the quality of public services has played a vital role in helping to create and sustain the necessary environment for achieving economic growth and social development. Ireland in recent years has had one of the most successful economies within the European Union and this represents a significant transformation from a very different, and not too distant, past. Hand in hand with these years of rapid economic growth, citizen/customer expectations have also risen and this has further helped to increase pressure for improved service quality.

Such socio-economic developments have in turn demanded, and will continue to require, a new and dynamic mindset from public service managers, many of whom would have laboured at earlier stages

in their careers through decades of economic under-performance, labour surplus, high unemployment, net out-migration and budgetary crisis. However, encouraged by active engagement with international organisations (e.g. at European Union and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) levels) and through exposure to the thinking behind New Public Management (NPM), a number of key, senior-level public servants in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to develop a vision for the Irish public service which would assist it in emerging from a traditional administrative culture and help it to respond positively to the socio-economic challenges facing the country. That challenge is now being taken on in different ways by new a generation of senior public sector change agents.

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Kokybės standartų gerinimas Airijos viešojoje tarnyboje

Reziumė

Remiantis neseniai atliktais tyrimais ir dabartiniu laikotarpiu vykdomais darbais, straipsnyje analizuojami Airijos pasiekimai, tobulinant viešųjų paslaugų teikimą piliečiams. Airijos pavyzdžiu parodyta, kad siekiant skatinti ir palaikyti inovacijas, padedančias gerinti paslaugų teikimo kokybės standartus, būtina atitinkama valstybės strategija ir struktūros, kurios nuolat rūpintųsi viešųjų paslaugų kokybės gerinimu. Airijos atveju tai realizuota specialia programa - iniciatyvomis, siejamomis su strateginiu planavimu. Apibendrintai tai vadinama *Strateginės vadybos iniciatyva*. Ta programa grindžiama daugeliu dokumentų: *Strateginėmis nuostatomis, Metiniais pažangos raportais, Klientų veiklos planais ir Verslo planais*. Jai įgyvendinti atlikta daugelio valdžios įstaigų restruktūrizacija; dažnai tai buvo siejama su efektyvesniu naujųjų informacijos ir ryšių technologijų naudojimu.