



Customer Action Plan 2004-2007



Department of Social & Family Affairs

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Customer Action Plan 2004-2007

Promoting a Caring Society

“Our mission is to promote a caring society through ensuring access to income support and related services, enabling active participation, promoting social inclusion and supporting families.”

We are committed

- to providing a quality service for all of our customers and our stakeholders;
- to ensuring the well-being and development of our staff who provide the service and
- to delivering value for money for the contributors and taxpayers who finance it.

Foreword by Minister

As Minister for a Department with such a large and diverse customer base, I am aware of the critical importance of delivering a quality customer service to all our customers.

This Department makes payments to over 938,000 people every week and processes 1.7 million claim transactions annually. There is, therefore a great challenge to us to continually respond effectively to the needs of our customers.

This is my Department's third Customer Action Plan which continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to continued progress in customer service delivery.

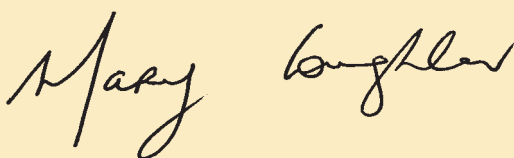
This Plan for 2004-2007 will build on the substantial progress already made by providing a comprehensive framework for this organisation to progress and develop its services. In this regard, we will continue to give effect to the 12 quality customer service principles, which were adopted by Government in 2000.

The Customer Charter Initiative launched by An Taoiseach in 2002 represents a very significant development in the delivery of quality customer services across the Public Service. My Department's first Customer Charter is a concise, specific and customer focussed initiative which will endeavour to translate quality customer service developments into meaningful improvements for our customers.

The Charter will not only set out our commitments and service standards to customers, but will also require that progress in meeting the standards is evaluated and reported upon. While the Customer Charter will be a public statement about our standards and services, this new Customer Action Plan will complement the Charter by outlining how the Department will give effect to these commitments.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil d'achan dhuine atá ag obair sa Roinn go dian dhiachalach chun seirbhísí proifisiúnta a thabairt d'ar chustaiméirí uilig.

Go n-eirí an t-ádh libh.



Mary Coughlan TD

Minister for Social and Family Affairs



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Introduction

This new Customer Action Plan will provide a specific focus on customer service developments for the next three years. The Department is committed to delivering a quality customer service to all our customers and also to ensuring the continuous improvement in the standard of service we provide. An outline of progress to date in relation to access to information, the future of service delivery and customer consultation is outlined in Chapter 2 on pages 22 to 27 of the Plan.

This Plan also outlines the key action points, which will be undertaken to continue to implement the 12 quality customer service principles, see Chapter 4.

Customer Charter

In December 2002, An Taoiseach launched the Customer Charter Initiative. This requires that all Government Departments produce a Customer Charter.

This Department has previously published customer service standards as part of our commitment to the 12 principles of customer service. The publication of a Customer Charter is the next step in the provision of customer service and will enhance the quality and accountability of service provided to the public.

The Charter is a short, easy to read document, which makes a public commitment to our customers on the standard of service they can expect from the Department. It will be well publicised through posters, leaflets and on our website. This Customer Action Plan describes how the Customer Charter commitments will be delivered and evaluated by the organisation. Chapter 3 of this Plan includes the Department's first Customer Charter.

Consultation

Active participation by and consultation with customers, management and staff was central in the preparation of the Customer Action Plan and Customer Charter.

Consultation took place with our customers and customer representative organisations through a series of fora, customer panel meetings and surveys. Since the last Customer Action Plan, the Department has further developed its channels for customer feedback. A significant landmark has been the introduction of a Comment and Complaint System which formalised the long held practice of dealing with complaints but in a more effective and efficient manner.

The new Comment and Complaint System involved:

- a comprehensive training programme of over 2,000 frontline staff
- a computerised system available in all of the Department's offices, to record complaints
- regular reporting on comments and complaints to senior management
- raising customer awareness of the system through leaflets and posters displayed in our local offices.

The Department also developed and extended the use of touchscreen technology to allow for customer surveys to be carried out in local offices around the country on a regular basis. The touchscreen survey which involves the use of a PC with a touchscreen monitor is both a customer friendly and efficient method of processing survey data. It is also a very cost effective method of carrying out customer surveys.

The feedback from these new consultation methods has also been taken into account in the preparation of this Customer Action Plan. Details of the consultation process are outlined in Appendix 2.

Chapter 1

“How the Department Operates”

This Chapter sets out the work of the Department and its evolving role.

HOW THE DEPARTMENT OPERATES

The Work of the Department and its Evolving Role

The main functions of the Department are to formulate appropriate social protection policies; to administer and manage the delivery of statutory and non-statutory social and family schemes and services, and to work with other Departments and Agencies in the delivery of Government priorities.

The Department is responsible for the delivery of a range of social insurance and social assistance schemes including pensions, benefits, allowances and other supports. Our income support work impacts on the lives of almost every person in the State and remains the largest element of the Department's business. Payments are made to over 938,000 people each week. Our role also includes supports for people to return to work and support for activities to combat poverty.

The Schemes operated by the Department are listed in Appendix 3.

In the achievement of our main functions we have set ourselves six high-level goals on which our work is based.

- **Income Support:** Promoting the development of adequate, secure and sustainable income support and related services and delivering appropriate services to the highest standards, in co-operation with other relevant agencies, and responsive to people's changing needs and entitlements, taking account of our responsibilities to contributors and tax-payers
- **Support to Work:** Facilitating return to work or participation in training or further education by people in the active age groups dependent on State income supports, through a range of supportive measures, including referral to other agencies as necessary
- **Families:** Supporting families in caring for children and other dependent family members, ensuring specific supports for disadvantaged families, families in conflict, one-parent families and families on low incomes and working with other agencies to identify and develop responses to key family issues
- **Poverty and Social Exclusion:** Provide relevant and effective supports to those affected by poverty and social exclusion and co-ordinate the development and implementation of the Government's strategy in this area, in cooperation with other statutory and voluntary agencies
- **e-Government Agenda:** Promoting the use and development of integrated services in line with the development of the e-Government agenda
- **The Department and its Staff:** Developing an effective, adaptable and capable organisation and a culture of pride, innovation and performance with a high level of involvement and participation by people at all levels and a climate which fosters personal and career development

Delivering Service to Customers

The Department has over 4,800 staff. Our headquarter offices are located in Dublin, Dundalk, Letterkenny, Longford, Sligo and Waterford.

Social Welfare Services 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. It is headed by the Director General. The Department's local delivery of services is structured on a 10-region basis with regional offices in Cork, Dundalk, Limerick, Longford, Sligo, Waterford, Galway and three in Dublin. There is a network of 58 Social Welfare Local Offices and 69 Branch Offices.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office operates independently of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals regarding social welfare entitlement and insurability of employment. It is headed by the Chief Appeals Officer who has overall responsibility for the administration of the appeals service. It has its own internal administration. The Appeals Office has its headquarters at D'Olier House in Dublin and appeals in the Dublin area are conducted there. Appeals Officers also hold hearings regionally to minimise travel requirements for appellants.

Comhairle is responsible for the provision of independent information, advice and advocacy services for all citizens throughout the country, including people with disabilities. **OASIS, On-line Access to Services, Information and Support**, is a public service information system, provided over the Internet by Comhairle.

The Social Welfare Tribunal is an independent body, which adjudicates in cases where a claim for an unemployment payment has been disallowed under the Trade Dispute provisions in the Social Welfare Acts and where the claims, or a union on their behalf, argues that the employer refused or failed to follow the normal negotiating machinery available for settling disputes.

The Pensions Ombudsman's Office investigates complaints of injustice due to maladministration; disputes of fact or law, in occupational pension schemes. The Pensions Ombudsman is a statutory officer and exercises his functions independently. He reports to the Houses of the Oireachtas. Enquiries regarding Social Welfare pensions and benefits are outside the remit of the Pensions Ombudsman and are therefore not dealt with by his Office. The Pensions Ombudsman's Office is based at 36, Upper Mount Street, Dublin 2. Tel: (01) 6471650, Fax: (01) 6769577. Email: info@pensionsombudsman.ie Website: www.pensionsombudsman.ie

Family Support Agency was formally established on 6 May 2003 and is responsible for the provision of a family mediation service; the support, promotion and development of marriage and relationship counselling and other family supports; and the Family and Community Services Resource programme.

Commitments to Quality Customer Service

The Commitments to Quality Customer Services as outlined in the Statement of Strategy 2003-2005 are:

Consultation

Further develop the consultative process so that customers can express opinions, give feedback and become involved with the setting of challenging service standards.

Information

Maintain a proactive approach to the provision of, and ease of access to, quality information and advice.

Employers

Help employers, as major stakeholders in the social insurance system, to fulfil their obligations in respect of the operation of PRSI.

Equality/Diversity

Ensure that the service we provide is equitable, non-discriminatory and takes account of increasing cultural diversity. A key focus in this regard is staff training and awareness raising.

Choice

Promote choice, where feasible, in all aspects of service delivery.

Payment Methods

Ensure that the most modern and the widest possible range of payment methods is available and provide access, where possible, to new payment services and facilities so that customers can choose the option that best suits their personal preferences.

Information and Communications Technology

Ensure that the potential offered by Information and Communications Technology is fully availed of.

Accommodation and Access

Modernise the standard of accommodation in our offices through our building programme, with particular emphasis on privacy and access for people with disabilities. The Department also supports the National Heritage Plan.

Appeals/Redress

Maintain a formalised, accessible and transparent system of appeal/review for customers who are dissatisfied with decisions on entitlements.

Comments and Complaints

Continue to promote the well-publicised and accessible system for dealing with comments and complaints about the quality of service provided.

Official Languages

Provide quality services through Irish and English if required and inform customers of their right to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.

Co-ordination and Integration

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

Customer Focused

Further promote and develop a strong customer service culture throughout the Department.

Training and Development

Support and encourage staff to fulfil customer service objectives by developing appropriate skills and awareness of customer needs.

Staff Consultation

Promote internal consultation at all levels in the Department so that the opinions of, and feedback from, staff are taken into account in improving customer service.

Monitoring of Quality

Identify, through the development and monitoring of customer service quality standards, those areas where improvement is warranted.

Sustaining Progress: the Department's Modernisation Action Plan

As required by a social partnership agreement, all Government Departments/Offices produced an action plan setting out the modernisation initiatives they intended to take over the course of the Sustaining Progress Agreement with a view to the further development of quality services which are accountable; achieve value-for-money; focus on the needs of customers and respond quickly and flexibly to change.

The Department's modernisation and change agenda is designed to ensure that the customer comes first by being placed continually at the centre of its operations and that our staff are equipped and supported in the delivery of this objective. The Modernisation Action Plan (MAP) contains some 100 commitments designed to deliver on this agenda.

Quality Accreditation

There is a strong case for quality measurement and improvement based around a recognised quality accreditation system.

Over the course of this Plan the Department will be introducing an appropriate system of quality service measurement, to assist in the review of existing customer service standards and identifying issues/problems/gaps.

The initial accreditation award will be targeted in the Child Benefit area of the Department. This will then lead to the expansion and development of the project across other areas of the Department.

Training and Development

The Department recognises that effective training of staff is vital in order to deliver quality customer service. There is a wide variety of staff training programmes in place.

Recognising that a major part of the work of the Department involves dealing with the public, the Department has developed a comprehensive customer service training programme. The programme was designed in conjunction with training officers and staff 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 Department's Staff Development Unit has recently reviewed the Customer Service Training Programme which now comprises a 2 day course as follows:

- Principles of Excellent Customer Service
- Customer Service and Control
- Communication with our Customers
- Customer Comments and Complaints Procedure
- Equality/Diversity
- Disability Awareness
- Effective Correspondence
- The Internal Customer

Customer Service Training will continue to be a central feature of the Department's training and development programme.

Internal Customer

The delivery of services requires a considerable personal input by many people and the publication, in April 2003, of the Department's Human Resources Strategy '*Partnership, Development and Performance*', 2003-2005 underlines the importance of the 'people dimension' in the work we do. As the Strategy Statement points out, a person-centred approach is a major element of the Department's customer service culture. In the same way the importance of a people-centred approach within the Department, of supporting each other and maintaining an environment in which the contribution of every member, is valued and acknowledged.

This is the fundamental premise for the approach to developing a strong internal customer service culture across the Department. In 2001, the first Internal Customer Service Plan '*Supporting Each Other*', 2001-2004 was published. It is a companion to the Customer Action Plan and is predicated on the crucial role that each individual plays in the provision of internal customer service. Arrangements have been put in place to monitor and report on commitments made and progress achieved by all areas of the Department on Internal Customer initiatives, and to continually promote awareness of the importance of good internal customer service generally. This Plan falls to be renewed in late 2004/early 2005.

Partnership

A key value and guiding principle of the Department is the recognition that effective delivery of services and management of work requires a partnership approach between management, unions and staff. A partnership approach has been adopted in the development of the Department's strategies and action plans.

The Department's Partnership Steering Committee is supported by 5 Regional committees and, to date, 35 local or special interest committees.

Equality and Diversity

The diversity principle recognises the differences between people and the benefits to be gained from these differences. Accommodating diversity is seen as one of the tools by which equality can be achieved. This principle, therefore, cuts across other aspects of service delivery and we are committed to serving our customers in an equitable and non-discriminatory way.

To achieve this, we also recognise that it is vital that our staff are supported, through our training programmes and other support methods. In that regard, diversity awareness training has long been a part of our customer service training programme together with specialised one-day courses.

Further staff training, support and awareness raising initiatives are ongoing, underpinned by research into best practice, customer consultation and co-operation with other Government Departments, offices and agencies. This Department has participated in the preparation of a support pack for Government Departments on staff training and diversity awareness, published in 2003, in co-operation with the Equality Authority and the Department of An Taoiseach.

A key awareness-raising initiative was achieved in 2003/04 with the publication of a report on issues affecting staff with disabilities. The report was produced by an internal, partnership-based sub-group and coincided with European Year of People with Disabilities (2003).

The report's 70 recommendations embrace:

- Recruitment practices
- Promotion/transfer opportunities
- Training and Development opportunities
- Physical access issues
- Working conditions (flexibility of working hours, sick or disability leave etc.)
- Ongoing support mechanisms for employees with disabilities

As a result of the work of the sub-group, disability awareness guidelines have been produced which have been circulated to all staff. These guidelines provide hints and information for staff when meeting and communicating with people with disabilities (whether colleagues or members of the public).

A monitoring group, which includes a number of staff members with disabilities, has been set up to monitor the Department-wide implementation of these recommendations.

Our Telephone Service

A significant proportion of our customers make contact with the Department by phone with around four million calls annually. This represents a major challenge for the Department. The level of service provided by phone is monitored and staff are provided with training on telephone skills.

The Department uses a Virtual Private Network (VPN). This means that geographically dispersed offices within the Department are treated as being part of a single telephone network, thus facilitating easier access to those offices for both customers and the Department's staff.

A LoCall service has been expanded across the following schemes.

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| ■ Child & Treatment Benefit | 1890 400 400 |
| ■ Social Welfare Appeals Office | 1890 74 74 34 |
| ■ Information Services:
Leaflet & Claim Form Request Line
<i>(24 hours, 7 days a week)</i> | 1890 20 23 25 |
| ■ Maternity Benefit | 1890 690 690 |
| ■ Pension Services Office | 1890 500 000 |

The Department currently makes Freephone numbers available at Budget time and when new schemes are being introduced.

Control of Fraud and Abuse

The Department's control strategy sets out to ensure that fraud and abuse are kept to a minimum by promoting control as an essential element of the day-to-day work of the Department.

A four-pronged approach has been adopted to meet this objective;

- Prevention
- Detection
- Deterrence
- Debt Recovery

A new control strategy was launched during 2003 and a key element of this new strategy is a risk assessment system, to ensure that control activity is focussed on areas of high risk and that available resources are efficiently and effectively targeted.

The Department will continue to raise public and staff awareness in relation to fraud. In this regard, particular emphasis will be placed on the recovery of monies received fraudulently or without entitlement and the prosecution of claimants who defraud the social welfare system and employers who fail to comply with their statutory obligations relating to social welfare legislation.

Service Integration/Cross Departmental Initiatives

The Department is involved in a number of initiatives aimed at achieving a more integrated approach to ensuring customer access to a wide range of social services including access to information services. The regional structure of the Department has facilitated more effective relationships with other State Agencies (including FÁS, the Health Boards, the Revenue Commissioners and Local Authorities).

Reach

Reach is an agency established by Government to develop a strategy for the integration of public services and to develop and implement the framework for electronic government. In May 2000, a Government mandate issued to build or procure a Public Services Broker. Since then, reach has been defining the architectures and principles underlying the operation of the Broker. Development of this facility will be progressed throughout the span of this plan. The selection process for external partners to assist reach in the development of the Public Services Broker is complete and a joint team of developers is now progressing this work.

Civil Registration Modernisation Programme

This is a joint programme, undertaken by the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Health and Children, to modernise the Civil Registration Service. The General Register Office (GRO) is a key component to the overall change programme. The modernisation programme involves the reform of legislation relating to the registration of births, deaths and marriages, the introduction of modern technology, the design and development of a new organisation structure and new registration processes and procedures. Major progress has been made with the modernisation programme and new legislation, as well as a new computer system and associated administrative structures and processes, are now in place with rollout of the system ongoing throughout 2004.

Service Delivery Modernisation Programme (SDM)

The Department is developing a new generation of IT systems which will facilitate more customer centred services and also supports the e-Government strategy. Organisational structures and work processes are being redesigned to take advantage of the flexibilities on offer from new IT systems. These developments will allow the Department to be more flexible in responding to changes in Government policies and customer needs. The SDM programme is a continuous development and is being implemented in a number of phases spanning several years. Phase 1 of the programme was successfully implemented in 2002 for Child Benefit and further developed in 2003 with the modernisation of the Civil Registration process.

Donegal Integrated Services Project

Donegal Integrated Service Delivery Project has been working for a number of years on reorganising public service delivery around the needs of the customer and based on the development of Public Service Centres. A major building programme has been completed with five new Centres now providing a range of services.

The overall vision of the project is:

To deliver a seamless, quality public service to customers and communities in Donegal through a choice of access channels.

The objective in the period ahead is to develop concepts into programmes that will improve in a very meaningful and positive way, the interaction by all State Agencies with their customers.

Family Service Project

The Employment Support Service and the Family Support Service at local level have been merged to form the Social and Family Service. This service provides a high quality information service as well as support, activation and referral for customers who are unemployed, lone parents, carers, and persons with disabilities. The new service will assist people who are most marginalised and most distant from the labour market, by focusing on their abilities and potential. For the unemployed customer this will mainly mean labour market interventions and educational opportunities. Other customers will have needs that will be addressed through appropriate supports provided by the Department or across the spread of other agencies that service such needs.

National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)

The Department has taken a key role in the development of, and the response to, the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS), Building an Inclusive Society, and the EU National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005.

The Office for Social Inclusion has been established within the Department to drive forward the implementation of the NAPS Strategy in co-operation with the other Departments, Agencies and organisations involved.

Chapter 2

“Improvements in the Department’s Services”

This Chapter sets out developments in the following areas:

1. Access to Information
2. The Future of Service Delivery
3. Our Commitment to Consultation

1. ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The provision of comprehensive, accurate, clear and simple information is essential to effective service delivery. The Department's information policy is to ensure that all citizens are made aware of their entitlements under social insurance and social assistance schemes as well as other supports and that changes are well publicised.

Developments and improvements in social welfare services are widely publicised using an appropriate mix of media at local and national level. Some "Freephone" services are used to provide information on the introduction of new schemes or, for example, at Budget time.

The Department's website (www.welfare.ie) which was comprehensively redesigned in 2003, provides information, email facilities, search facilities and links to related sites.

Information Services Strategy

An Information Services Strategy was launched in 2003 which articulates the future development of information for the Department.

The six objectives of the Strategy are:

- To develop and enhance the Department's Information Services, including the setting of standards for information content and dissemination processes
- To ensure the best possible delivery of Information Services in the context of this strategy
- To provide Information Officers based in Local Offices with the necessary training and support to enable them to achieve the objectives of this Strategy, especially in terms of the development of local information services
- To provide staff in Information Services with an improved level of support and training given their central role in the development of an effective information service
- To develop the Social Welfare Local Offices and Branch Offices as first points of contact for the information needs of personal callers in relation to social welfare schemes and services
- To provide appropriate support to organisations providing accurate and independent information on social welfare services and schemes to citizens while recognising the Department's primary responsibility for dissemination of information and advice on social welfare schemes and services

Website Developments

The Department maintains a website at **www.welfare.ie**. All information published in the conventional manner is now published on the website which provides e-mail, search facilities and links to other related sites. The site also provides an option to download the main application forms, to register as unemployed and to make a comment or complaint.

The objectives of the Department's website are:

- To enable the Department to provide full, concise and timely access to information
- To position the site so that it can progress to the provision of a more interactive/transactive and integrated service

The main features of the redesigned website are:

- A navigation system which provides for ease of access to information
- Summary application forms online
- Links to other related websites
- Mailing list option for press releases
- Online publication request option
- Connectivity with other public sector portals
- Promotion of public access to website
- Potential for the development of interfaces for emerging technology options e.g. digital TV, kiosks, WAP etc.
- Fully compliant with "Triple A" (AAA) accessibility standard for visually impaired users

OASIS, Online Access to Services, Information and Support

The OASIS website has been specially designed around the needs of users for those times in life when information is required about rights and how to apply for State services.

Information is provided under the heading of "life events" such as the birth of a baby, getting married, buying a house or car which result in a series of transactions between an individual and various public sector organisations. OASIS presents the information people need for particular events in their lives, in one place, regardless of the number of agencies involved.

The OASIS site also has a Service Finder that allows the customer to find contact information for over 8,000 public service providers in Ireland. In time, the website will also act as a portal or gateway to services. The website address is **www.oasis.gov.ie**

Freedom of Information (FOI)

Arrangements for processing requests under the Freedom of Information Act are operating successfully in the Department.

The FOI Unit oversees the administration of the procedures; liaises with other Departments and the Information Commissioner and provides support and advice to FOI Officers and Internal Reviewers, on an ongoing basis.

Over 100 designated members of staff act as either FOI Officers or Reviewers. Circulars and Bulletins provide ongoing support on FOI issues to decision makers. Regular quality control surveys are carried out by FOI Unit to ensure consistency and quality in FOI decision-making. In line with recommendations made by the Information Commissioner in his report “The Freedom of Information Act Compliance by Public Bodies” (July 2001) – enhancements have been made to statistics gathered, quality control procedures and the provision of advice, support and training to FOI decision makers particularly in relation to non-personal requests.

Data Protection

The Department holds important customer information in both manual and electronic forms and are obliged under law to maintain the confidentiality of this data. The Department has cultivated, and will continue to develop a high awareness amongst staff of the importance of data protection and confidentiality.

As part of this process effective Business Information Protection policies have been developed and implemented to protect the security and confidentiality of all data.

A security framework is being put into place to integrate existing procedures, guidelines and data protection standards in operation in the organisation.

Decisions Advisory Office (DAO)

This Office has an overseeing role to ensure that decisions made on social welfare claims are consistent, of good quality, and that claim decisions are issued to claimants in a clear, understandable way. Guidelines, advice and training are provided for Deciding Officers on making and notifying decisions. DAO staff consult with the Social Welfare Appeals Office on appeal matters. This in turn results in information gathering, and the provision of useful feedback to Deciding Officers to use as part of their work.

Regulatory Reform

Regulatory reform is one of the pillars of the civil service modernisation programme and is critical to the development and strengthening of a customer oriented and citizen-welfare focus in the Department’s services. Preparing and applying legislation is a key function of this Department and the main vehicle for giving effect to policy changes. In general, the Department’s income support schemes have a statutory basis contained in the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act, 1993, as amended.

The quality and quantity of the legislation enacted by the Department impacts directly on the Department’s operating environment and is fundamental to the efficient, effective and transparent conduct of its business. The objective in this area is to ensure that a sound legislative basis exists for social protection schemes and that the legislation is easily accessible to those who apply it and for customers.

Work has commenced on a Social Welfare Consolidation Bill which is scheduled to be published in 2004. This will consolidate Social Welfare Acts from 1993-2004. Work has also commenced on a consolidation of the Occupational Injuries Regulations from 1967 to date.

It is also planned to commence work on the consolidation of the Social Welfare (Claims and Payments) Regulations in 2004 which will consolidate the regulations from 1994 to date.

Review of Social Welfare Schemes

The views of individual customers, through customer surveys, and the views of various customer representative groups, are taken into account by the Department when reviewing the effectiveness of its schemes and services. These reviews also provide opportunities to rationalise and simplify the social welfare system. Changes to social welfare legislation following review, are normally incorporated in the annual Social Welfare Bill which implements the Budgetary social welfare improvements.

2. THE FUTURE OF SERVICE DELIVERY

The Department's strategy for improving the delivery of its services in the future is outlined in the Strategy Statement and Business Plans.

The Department plans to undertake a radical transformation of service delivery using modern technology and business models, implemented through a partnership process.

In line with the Principles of Quality Customer Service this strategy is about giving the customer a more responsive service, better facilitating staff in their dealings with customers and employing modern technology to provide more streamlined and efficient processes.

It also takes account of e-Government goals and targets in relation to service delivery; access; payments; technical infrastructure and architecture, data sharing and integrated service delivery.

Service Delivery Modernisation Programme (SDM)

The on-line registration of the birth of a child sets in motion:

- The allocation of a Personal Public Service (PPS) Number for the child
- The automated initiation of the Child Benefit claim process for the first born child in a family and
- The automated payment for subsequent children in a family, (where the newborn child is not the first in the family and the Child Benefit is already in payment in respect of other child|ren)

Implementation of SDM, including technological, organisational and business process change, is now being extended. Phase 2 has been initiated for the Retirement/Old Age Contributory Pension schemes, related Household Benefits and other allowances. It is planned to implement Phase 2 on an iterative basis, with the first iteration planned to go live during 2004 and the final iteration in late 2005.

Phase 3 of SDM will cover Widows/Widowers/Orphans and Invalidity Pensions with a planned implementation date in 2006.

Client Identity Services

The updating of Client Identity Services records with verified GRO data, updating of new life event data to Departmental systems and on-line access to the GRO database will allow for more pro active service by the Department. This will allow speedier claim processing, minimise customer effort in sourcing and supplying life event certification and help to improve control of schemes.

The Personal Public Service Number (PPS Number) is the citizen's unique reference for access to, and dealings with, all public service providers. The number, as the established cross-government identifier, provides for speedy and secure access to integrated services.

The Public Service Broker (PSB), currently being developed by reach, is central to the delivery of e-Government services in Ireland. The Broker will act as the single point of access to public services for citizens and businesses. The PPS Number will be key to the delivery of services via the Broker.

In addition, Client Identity Services (CIS) is currently developing the Public Service Identity (PSI) services which will be accessed via the Broker. This will allow all Departments and Agencies to securely validate PPS Numbers for their customers in real time and to allow for the provision of more efficient customer services. PSI services will be managed and supported by CIS.

CIS is currently using GRO life event data to update customer records and forwarding this data to scheme areas. The automation of this process allied to on-line access will allow for pro-active service delivery and speedier claim processing. CIS will co-ordinate, support and manage the dissemination of this data to scheme areas.

Reach – The Development of Integrated State Services for Customers

The Reach Agency was established in 1999 with a mandate to develop a framework for the integration of public services and to specify and establish a single, multi-channel gateway to government referred to initially as the Public Services Broker.

Since then, the reach initiative has focused on the specification of a technical architecture which will facilitate the fulfilment of services to customers in an on-line environment across the public sector. The public services broker, now known as reachservices will provide a means whereby customers can gain access to information and public service initiation requests on a 24/7 basis and may expect fulfilment of the service request with minimised repetition of basic data and with much reduced form-filling and paper dependence generally.

Reachservices will also provide an authenticated identity, in respect of its already registered customer, to the delivery Agency and at a level, which is appropriate to the service to be provided. This will relieve the agency of the requirement to carry out its own separate identity validation and allow for the speedier processing of the service request. The reachservices architecture will facilitate this interaction by providing a secure and reliable messaging framework for the processing of on-line service requests. The service also provides the means by which varied agencies concerned with the completion of a particular transaction can engage with the system at minimal cost or disruption to their own systems and infrastructure.

During the lifetime of the current Action Plan, reachservices will be deployed and made available to all public sector agencies and new services from the agencies will be made available to the public via reachservices on an ongoing basis.

Modernisation of Civil Registration Service (GRO)

The Civil Registration Modernisation Programme is a joint project between the Departments of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Health and Children aimed at introducing a modern Civil Registration Service. There are some 110,000 life events registered, 500,000 certificates issued and 1.2 million searches of registration records each year. This was a major undertaking involving the:

- Introduction of technology - online registration, electronic certificate production, capture of digitised signatures
- Redesign of business processes and procedures
- Capture and retrieval of paper based records in electronic format
- Reform of legislation.

Central to the successful implementation of the modernisation programme was the design and implementation of a staff and customer consultation framework. The steps involved publishing the public consultation document, 'Bringing Civil Registration into the 21st Century' (www.groireland.ie) which set out the context and proposed future approach to civil registration and related services, meetings with interest groups, staff briefing sessions followed by the setting up of different user groups e.g. Programme Partnership Committee, local Implementation Teams and issuing staff newsletters.

Roll-out of the new computer system and new processes and procedures commenced in July 2003 and is expected to be completed in 2004.

The development and implementation of the new civil registration processes/procedures and computer system has radically transformed the way business is carried out both within the Civil Registration Service and within DSFA.

The visible improvement, from the customer perspective, is that a single interaction with a public service agency, i.e. the registration of the birth of a child with the Civil Registration Service, not only achieves its original purpose but also causes the initiation of a series of related services by another agency, DSFA. This is in addition to the vastly improved service available to the customer as a result of the modernisation of Civil Registration and Child Benefit.

Localisation of Services

In October 2003, Finglas and Waterford Local Offices began to operate the localised delivery of the One Parent Family Payment (OPFP). Hitherto, the scheme was administered from the Department's offices in Sligo. Following on from the successful pilots, the rollout of OPFP to other local offices is continuing throughout 2004. The localisation programme will enable quicker decisions, access to a service delivered locally and access to information on the range of services available through the local office network.

3. OUR COMMITMENT TO CONSULTATION

Consultation with Customers

Consultation with customers is an integral part of the Department's business. It assists in identifying areas for improvement. The Department uses a variety of consultation methods in order to get as wide a view as possible, including, day-to-day contacts, surveys, panels and our customer Comment and Complaint System. By obtaining the views of customers we can understand their needs and expectations so that policies and services reflect, and are responsive to, their requirements.

Surveys

Two types of customer survey methods are used by this Department i.e. postal surveys and touchscreen surveys. Since 2001 there have been 8 postal surveys carried out across the country seeking views from a wide customer base (see Appendix 2 for full details).

Touchscreen Surveys

The Department has developed touchscreen technology to facilitate customer surveys. The mobile PC based equipment, available across all 10 regions, is used at local offices and exhibition venues.

Touchscreen involves a face-to-face survey, with customers being invited to participate in completing a questionnaire on screen and facilitated by a member of staff.

A key advantage to this approach revolves around customer feedback at the actual point and time of service. This ensures continual monitoring of customers views and where appropriate the development of suitable and effective service delivery. The technology is a fast and efficient survey method. Results are produced within minutes of survey completion. This facility has been used to measure customer satisfaction in relation to the delivery of the 12 quality customer service principles across the 10 regions in 2003.

Further developments in the use of touchscreen technology will be made during the life of this Plan, based on the recommendations from an independent evaluation on survey methodology carried out in October 2003.

Panels

Customer panels involve customers meeting representatives from the Department on an informal basis to express their opinions of the service they have received. Customers participating on panels are consulted on a variety of issues. Since 2001 there have been 31 customer panel meetings held nationwide across a number of different schemes types (see Appendix 2 for details).

Business Users

A Small Business Users Forum was set up in 1997, jointly by this Department and the Revenue Commissioners. Following this a Business Users Panel was established, comprising representatives from employer organisations and small employers along with staff from Revenue and this Department. The Panel was used as a vehicle to explore ways in which the administration of PAYE and PRSI systems could be improved or simplified.

In 2003, a meeting was held with Business Interests to discuss service feedback issues. This was a joint initiative by Revenue and this Department as part of a customer consultation process in preparation for a Customer Charter. The initiative proved very successful, with useful feedback given on ways in which information dissemination can be improved to customers through employers.

Consultation Forum for People with Disabilities

A Forum of the principal organisations representing people with disabilities and service providers was established by this Department in 1996. The purpose of this forum was to ensure that all aspects and implications of the transfer of the Disabled Person's Maintenance Allowance (renamed Disability Allowance) from the Health Boards to this Department were discussed. The Consultative Forum, chaired by the Department, has continued in operation, meeting on a quarterly basis and has since been broadened to address issues concerning Invalidity Pension and Carer's Allowance Schemes.

In brief, the Forum acts as a channel to communicate the views of such organisations to the Department and it also provides a mechanism to review and make recommendations which can then input into policy making. In addition, the Forum reviews the operation and administration of income and employment support services delivered by the Department to people with disabilities and to carers.

Comment and Complaint System

In May 2002 the Department introduced a formal Comment and Complaint System. This system:

- Ensures that there is consistency in how comments and complaints are dealt with across the organisation;
- Includes a customer leaflet "Comments & Complaints" that is available from any of the Department's offices;
- Was accompanied by a complaint handling guide for all staff;
- Allows for comments and complaints to be recorded on a computerised system in any of our offices across the country.

A comprehensive training programme for staff on handling the system was rolled out across the Department and continued throughout 2003.

The recording system provides comprehensive data on areas of concern to customers. Output is collated and reported to senior management (see Appendix 3).

Review of Customer Survey Methodology

An independent review of the Department's customer consultation methods was carried out in 2003. The aim of this project was to review existing survey methods and bring the Department's methodology into line with current market research standards. The recommendations arising from the review will be implemented commencing in 2004. This process should ensure that future surveys conducted by the Department will better satisfy criteria of reliability and validity.

Follow Up on Customer Service Feedback

Follow up on the suggestions, comments and views put forward by customers is an essential part of customer consultation. Recently customer concerns about the complexity of our forms and communications generally have led to the establishment of a Communications Group which reviewed a cross section of the Department's forms and drew up "a guide to writing better letters and forms" which was distributed to all staff. The Department has also engaged the services of a representative of the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) who is vetting leaflets and forms to ensure that they comply with 'Plain English' standards.

Customers from a carers and disabilities panel raised concerns in relation to accessing information about the schemes and services available to them from the various Government Departments and Agencies. To address this problem, the Department produced a leaflet incorporating all of the names and contact telephone numbers of Statutory and non-Statutory organisations providing relevant services. The leaflet (SW110) containing useful contact information is available by calling the Leaflet Line (LoCall 1890 20 23 25) or from local offices.

Visually impaired customers are another category who may have difficulty accessing the Department's services. The Department is engaging in ongoing consultation with visually impaired customers to assist in the provision of an accessible service. Developments have included a commitment that the Department will communicate with its visually impaired customers using the method that suits them best. Improvements centre around telephone and email facilities with for example, applications for Blind Persons Pension and Free Schemes now accepted over the phone. The technology is currently being put in place to enable communication using Braille, with input from visually impaired customers regarding its use.

Chapter 3

“Our Service for You”

This Chapter sets out the commitments we propose to deliver as part of our first Customer Charter.

Introduction

The Department is committed to delivering a high quality customer service. An Taoiseach set down a requirement by Government in December 2002, that all Departments should publish a Customer Charter.

Before preparing this Charter we asked our customers and staff for their views on our existing service. The following key areas were identified as most important from the feedback we received from that consultation process:

- Access to our Services
- Provision of Information
- Your Claim
- Comments & Complaints

We have included other commitments which will further assist in the provision of the best quality service possible.

Our commitments, outlined in this Chapter – “What We will Do for You”, is our response to your views and suggestions. We will be focussing on the aspects of our service that mean most to you for the duration of this Charter.

We can all help to make our experiences as pleasant as possible in our dealings with one another, by working together to show respect, consideration and patience.

We have also included a number of ways in which you can help.



What We Will Do for You

Access to Our Services

We are committed to:

- Making our offices accessible for all including people with disabilities (80% of our offices are accessible for people with disabilities at present)
- Extending our opening hours in many of our Local Offices (check the opening hours displayed at your own Local Office)
- Respecting your privacy needs if calling to our offices
- Improving our services for visually impaired customers (LoCall 1890 500 000 ext 8442 or 8459 for this service)
- Improving our telephone answering service by aiming towards a target of answering all telephone calls within 30 seconds
- Phoning you back if you ask us to

Help Us to Help You

- Have your Personal Public Service Number (PPS Number) and other reference numbers ready when contacting the Department
- Bring two forms of ID (such as current passport or the long version of your birth certificate *and* a driver's licence or Child Benefit Book/Bank Card/Rent Book)
- Bring your Social Services Card if you have one

Provision of Information

We are committed to:

- Providing you with full, clear and correct information on our schemes and services when required. You can request claim forms and information leaflets by telephoning LoCall 1890 20 23 25 or you can download them from our website at www.welfare.ie
- Ensuring our forms and leaflets are simple and easy to understand
- Providing help with filling in forms at your local Social Welfare Office or your local Citizen's Information Centre (contact LoCall 1890 777 121)
- Supporting employers in the operation of the PRSI contribution system

Your Claim

We are committed to:

- Letting you know how soon you may expect a decision on your claim
- Advising you how to get financial or other help in the meantime, if necessary
- Letting you know the different payment options available
- Informing you of the reasons for the decision on your claim
- Informing you of your right to appeal that decision and how to make an appeal
- Letting you know that you also have access to the Ombudsman's Office

Help Us to Help You

- Fill in all forms fully, sign them and send or hand in all the documents needed with your claim
- Be on time for appointments or let us know if you will be late
- Let us know if there is any change in your circumstances (for example getting married; changing address; taking up employment)
- Make yourself aware of the rules and regulations governing the receipt of your payment and comply with them

Security and Confidentiality

We are committed to:

- Keeping your personal information safe
- Using that information only for social welfare purposes and as permitted by law

Treating you Fairly

We are committed to:

- Serving all our customers in an equal, fair and courteous manner
- Applying the law consistently and fairly in relation to your entitlements and obligations

Service Through Irish

We are committed to:

- Providing quality services through Irish and English if required

e-Government Services

We are committed to:

- Using modern technology to significantly improve the service we give
- Providing an improved range of services through our website
- Continuing to support reach (an agency set up by the Government to develop electronic ways of linking people and the public service)

Comments and Complaints

We are committed to:

- Promoting and developing our existing Comment and Complaint System (in operation since May 2002)
- Answering any complaint within 15 working days
- Guaranteeing that your complaint will not affect how we treat you in the future

Help Us to Help You

Let us know if:

- You are not happy with our service or You have any ideas on how we can improve our service

*You can get a Comment and Complaint Leaflet from any of our local or public offices **or** from our website **www.welfare.ie***

You may also make a complaint directly by phoning any of our offices with the details.

Customer Feedback

Our aim is to give you the best service possible in your dealings with us. We welcome your views on how we can continue to improve our service into the future.

Chapter 4

“Principles of Quality Customer Service”

This Chapter sets out details of the planned progress under the twelve quality customer service principles.

Introduction

A key objective of the modernisation programme of the Irish Public Service is the achievement of an excellent service for customers at all levels.

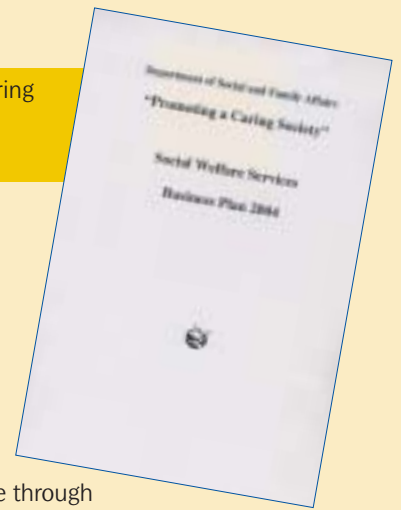
Twelve quality customer service principles set out in broad terms the level of commitment to customer service that should be aspired to.

This Department will progress the implementation of these principles over the next three years. The key actions that will be undertaken by the organisation to achieve these goals are outlined in the following pages.

Timeliness and Courtesy

Principle: 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.

The Department is committed to quality customer service in the area of claim processing by undertaking to make decisions on claims as quickly as possible and to deal with claims fairly and consistently. Ongoing training is provided to Deciding Officers in this regard and the Department's customer service training programme emphasises the need to treat customers with courtesy and empathy.



Key Action Points

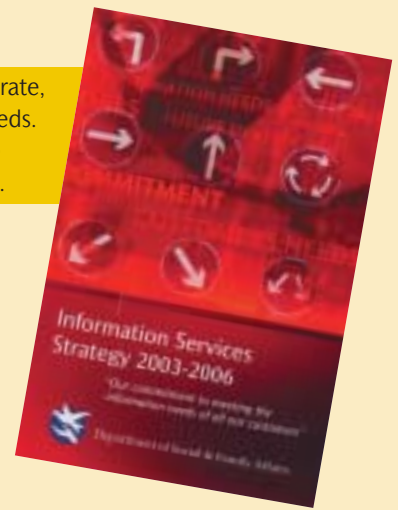
- Continue monitoring/reviewing of performance levels in various aspects of the service through monthly reporting, the business planning process and annual reporting
- Continue to provide further customer service training on an ongoing basis
- Automated proactive initiation by the Department of Retirement/Old Age Contributory pension claims and related allowances for persons approaching age 65/66 – issue of personalised claim form or letter of invitation to claim
- Additional access channels where pro-active pension claim initiation is not feasible – phone, post, in person at an office of the Department and via the Public Service Broker
- Integrated processing of pension claim and related allowances, relieving pensioners of the need to complete multiple claim forms, minimising customer effort
- Use existing data sources in the Department and seek only customer data not already available to the Department
- Paper management strategy to eliminate paper insofar as is possible by using a basic document imaging system to allow for speedier responses to customer queries
- Scheme simplification and rationalisation – ongoing review of legislation and guidelines around administration of contributory pensions and related allowances with a view to easing complexity, for both customers and staff

Information

Principle: Take a proactive 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 the drive for simplification of rules; regulations; forms; information; leaflets and procedures. Simple English will be the hallmark of leaflets; claim forms; letters and advertisements from this Department.

In co-operation with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) a development worker will work with the Department in developing a plain English policy and a literacy friendly “in-house” style; designing literacy awareness training for staff; reviewing and revising leaflets; claim forms; letter formats and in initiating research into strategies that complement or replace the use of the written word in communications.



Key Action Points

Access and Awareness

- Expand the Department's LoCall service on a phased basis
- Provide an enhanced information service in Branch Offices
- Continue to support employers by providing comprehensive information regarding the Department's schemes and services
- Continue to attend exhibitions and give information talks to local and community groups
- Scheme simplification and rationalisation – ongoing review of legislation and guidelines around administration of contributory pensions and related allowances with a view to easing complexity, for both customers and staff
- Set up customer contact centre for pensioners for the provision of information and maintenance of claims
- Extend the opening hours in many of our Local Offices (check the opening hours displayed at your own Local Office)
- Improve our services for visually impaired customers (LoCall 1890 500 000 ext 8442 or 8459 for this service)
- Improve our telephone answering service by aiming to answer all calls within 30 seconds

Website

- Further develop the new website for the Department (www.welfare.ie) launched in Quarter 4, 2003
- Provide Information Officers in Social Welfare Local Offices with access to the website
- Provide Information Officers in Social Welfare Branch Offices with access to website
- Develop facility for the submission of summary application on-line
- Provide access to website in public areas in selected Social Welfare Local Offices

Leaflets & Booklets

- Ensure forms and leaflets are simple and easy to understand and conform with 'Plain English' standards

Irish

- Translate all main information leaflets and claim forms into Irish

Physical Access

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

The Department will continue the programme to build new offices and refurbish existing offices. The Department has a growing number of modern and accessible offices. The process of upgrading the office network will continue with particular emphasis on privacy and access for people with disabilities.



Key Action Points

- Implement the building and refurbishment programme
- Maintain existing accommodation to a standard acceptable to those who use it, taking account of the views of both customers and staff
- Continue the review of Local Office layout and design, to reflect the changing needs of service delivery by end of 2007
- Make our offices accessible for all, including people with disabilities (80% of our offices are accessible for people with disabilities at present)

Better Co-ordination

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

The Department is organised on a regional basis and has well-established effective working relationships with the other social and public service organisations such as FÁS and the Health Boards at local level. There are a number of initiatives that the Department is involved in at present which are designed to improve the co-ordination of policy at national and local level as well as the integration of services at local level.



Key Action Points

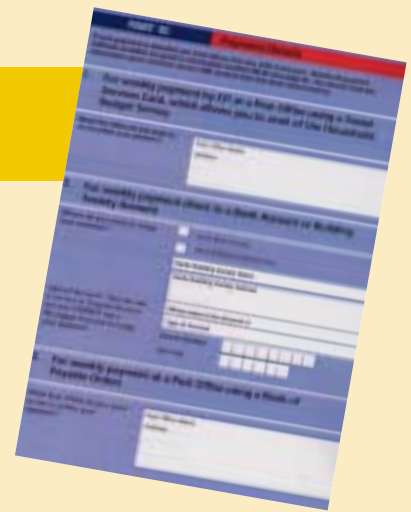
- Develop a Public Service Identity common customer database Quarter 3, 2004 and promote the use of the PPS Number as a unique identifier for accessing public services
- Progress inter-departmental initiatives such as reach; GRO and the development of a Public Service Card framework
- Continue to participate in the RAPID (Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development) programme
- Integrate on-line data on births, marriages and deaths from GRO with Departmental systems
- Provide on-line access to GRO data for Departmental staff, thereby eliminating the need for customers to provide life event certification to the Department

Choice

Principle: 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.

Key Action Points

- Continue to advise customers of all payment methods available to them
- Develop a framework and recommendations on card-enabled access to public services Quarter 4, 2004
- Identify and prioritise services for e-enablement and online delivery via the reach Public Service Broker (for launch Quarter 2, 2004) and by the 2005 EU deadline for online delivery of public services
- Facilitate the delivery of services through new channels such as the Internet
- Introduce lunchtime opening in many of our Local Offices (check the opening hours displayed at your own Local Office)



Official Languages

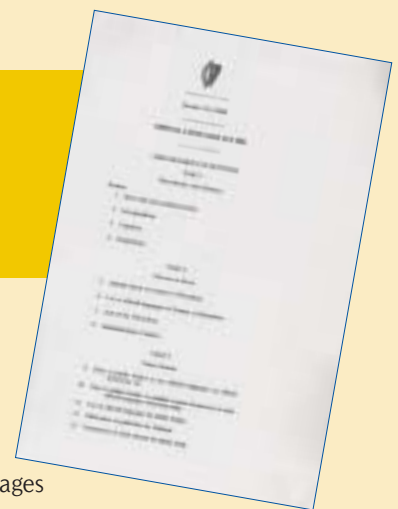
Principle: Provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their right to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.

Seirbhísí cáilíochta a sholáthar trí Ghaeilge agus/nó go dátheangach agus custaiméirí a chur ar an eolas faoina gceart an rogha a bheith acu go ndéileálfáí leo trí cheann do na teangacha oifigiúla.

The provision of specialised training courses for front line staff continues and will be extended to all sections of the Department.

Key Actions

The provision of customer service is now subject to the requirements of the Official Languages Act 2003. The scheme or planning framework, which will spell out the details of the service which will be provided in Irish, in English or bilingually will be drawn up in 2004. A high standard of service provision taking the requirements of the Act into account – in face-to-face and written communication, signage, information leaflets and forms as well as on the Department's website will be aimed for.



Equality/Diversity

Principle: 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).

Diversity, as a concept, recognises the differences between people and the benefits to be gained from these differences. Accommodating diversity is seen as one of the tools by which equality can be achieved. The principle cuts across all other aspects of service delivery and we are committed to serving our customers in an equitable and non-discriminatory way.

To fully achieve this, we also recognise that it is vital that our staff are supported, through our training programmes and other support methods.

Key Action Points

- Update, in the light of legislative developments, the support pack for staff dealing with non-national customers published February 2002, Q3, 2004
- Continually monitor and review needs in relation to our interpretation facilities. This service is currently available in 12 of our Local and Public Offices – Ongoing
- Continue the emphasis on our customer service training on diversity awareness covering aspects of the equality and diversity agenda. At present, our specialised awareness training courses cover modules dealing with non-nationals; disability and travellers – Ongoing
- Continue and develop other staff support initiatives in the area of equality and diversity – Ongoing
- Provide system supports to deal with customers with special needs

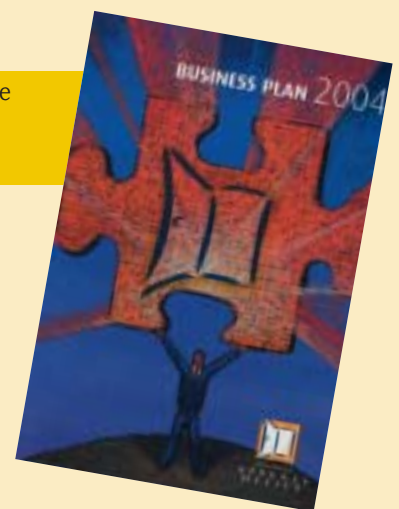


Appeals

Principle: 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.

Key Action Points

- Update and simplify forms and leaflets
- Launch website, specific to the Social Welfare Appeals Office
- Publish a selection of case studies in the annual report of the Chief Appeals Officer and later, on the website
- Ensure all appeals are processed in the shortest possible time
- Ensure that customers are advised of access to the Ombudsman's Office



Quality Service Standards

Principle: 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.

The Department's commitment to quality service is displayed in posters in all Local and Public Offices. Performance standards in relation to claim processing, telephone response times and correspondence are monitored on a monthly basis and updated annually. The standards and performance levels achieved are published in the Department's annual report.

A number of these standards have been revised as part of the Customer Charter process and will be monitored and reported on throughout the span of the Action Plan.

Key Action Points

- Display Charter posters to advise customers of the standards they can expect from us, in all our public offices
- Publicise and monitor all charter feedback
- Monitor performance figures on a monthly basis
- Develop an improved set of performance measurements
- Make the Customer Action Plan available to any customer who wishes to have a copy
- Provide customers with high quality correspondence



Comments and Complaints

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

Key Action Points

- Continue to support all staff in the operation of the Comment and Complaint System
- Continue to monitor all comments and complaints generated by the system
- Publicise the Comments and Complaints System using the Customer Charter Initiatives
- Answer any comments or complaints within 15 working days



Consultation and Evaluation

Principle: 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.



Key Action Points

- Survey unemployed customers in all regions annually and report on the findings
- Survey customers of all Departmental schemes over the duration of the Customer Action Plan
- Set up at least 6 customer panels over the course of the Customer Action Plan
- Proactively inform customers of the new Departmental Charter
- Ensure that customer comment and complaint forms are available in all public offices and on the Department's website, to facilitate completion and emailing to the Department
- Continue to consult with business users on customer service issues using electronic channels
- Continue consultation with customer representative groups
- Review findings of customer surveys regularly and incorporate feedback into ongoing training and development initiatives
- Implement the findings of the independent review of consultation methods
- Engage in consultation with pensioners in relation to the development of new service delivery initiatives
- Carry out an independent national survey in 2006

“We Value Your Opinion”

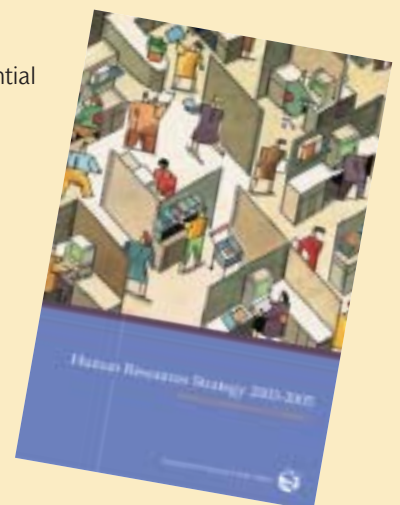
Internal Customer

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

The Department is one of the largest service delivery organisations in the State with a very diverse customer base. The services for which we are responsible impact on the lives of almost every person in the country. The delivery of those services has to be of the highest standard in order to meet the legitimate needs of our customers. It follows that our internal customer service and supports must be of a similar high standard to enable staff do their jobs and the organisation meet its objectives.

Key Action Points

- Continuing implementation of the Department's Human Resources Strategy, 2003-2005
- Produce a successor Internal Customer Service Plan – Q4, 2004-Q1, 2005
- Continue to promote partnership as the basis for managing and delivering the Department's work
- Implement, as required, the recommendations of the Departmental partnership review process throughout 2004
- Continue to promote internal customer initiatives across the Department
- Ensure that front line staff, Deciding Officers and Information Officers receive timely updates of any change to regulations etc.
- Timely publishing of staff guidelines, on all the Department's schemes
- Continue the publication of the FOI/DAO bulletin(s) annually
- Continue the publication of the Social Affairs staff magazine
- In addition to training for frontline staff, develop appropriate Internal Customer training for staff not on the frontline
- Build multi-skilled teams to handle all aspects of pension claim processing as an essential feature of the customer focus underpinning the SDM programme
- Provide staff with on-line supports and all relevant training in new systems



Appendices

1. Current Performance Standards
2. Customer Surveys and Panels
3. Classification of Departmental Schemes
4. Acknowledgements

Appendix 1

Current Performance Standards (January-June 2004)

Activity	Standards	
NEW CLAIMS	CLEARANCE TIME (1)	VOLUME CONTEXT (2)
Old Age Contributory Pension	55% in 6 weeks	14,000
Retirement Pension	80% in 5 weeks	14,000
Widow/ers Contributory Pension	80% in 5 weeks	8,500
Old Age Non-Contributory Pension	65% in 8 weeks	11,500
Blind Person's Pension	65% in 8 weeks	220
Widow(er) Non-Contributory Pension	75% in 8 weeks	1,300
One-Parent Family Payment (Widow)	75% in 8 weeks	600
One-Parent Family Payment (Unmarried)	55% in 8 weeks	13,600
One-Parent Family Payment (Separated Spouse)	65% in 13 weeks	6,500
Carers Allowance	70% in 13 weeks	6,000
Bereavement (PSO)	80% in 3 weeks	18,000
Bereavement (Longford)	80% in 3 weeks	6,300
Free Electricity/Gas Allowance	70% in 7 weeks	39,000
Free Telephone Allowance	70% in 7 weeks	49,000
Free Travel – New Pass	90% in 4 weeks	16,000
Free Travel – Replacement Pass	90% in 2 weeks	10,000
Unemployment Benefit	85% in 2 weeks	120,000
Unemployment Assistance	70% in 2 weeks	120,000
Disability Benefit	90% in 1 week	200,000
Occupational Injury Benefit (Interim DB)	85% in 1 week	} 18,000
Occupational Injury Benefit	80% in 4 weeks	
Treatment Benefit (3)	90% in 2 weeks	684,000
Child Benefit	90% in 1 week	168,000
Maternity Benefit (before start of Benefit period)	80%	28,000
Family Income Supplement	70% in 3 weeks	18,000
Invalidity Pension	70% in 9 weeks	7,500
Disability Allowance	70% in 13 weeks	12,000
Telephone Service	aiming to answer all calls within 30 seconds	4,200,000
Replies to Public Representatives	80% within 3 working weeks	4,800
<i>CES</i>		
Issue of Contribution Records to customers	60% in 5 days	3,600
Tax & Probate Offices	70% in 5 days	48,000
Scope	55% in 13 weeks	1,200
<i>ARREARS</i>		
PSO	80% within 3 weeks of claim being put in payment	54,000
Longford	80% within 3 weeks of claim being put in payment	24,000

(1) Clearance time: Elapsed time from date claim received to date of decision.

(2) Volume Context: Annual volume that scheme sections can reasonably be expected to clear.

(3) This relates to all optical claims and 40% of dental claims where pre-treatment claims are submitted.

Appendix 2

Customer Surveys 2001 to date

Type	Area	Date
Unemployed	Donegal	April 2001
Independent Survey	National	May 2001
Unemployed	Newbridge	September 2001
Disability Benefit	Dublin	Autumn 2001
Disability Allowance	Longford	Autumn 2001
Family Income Supplement	Longford	June 2002
Invalidity Pension	Longford	July 2002
Disability Benefit/Occupational Injury Benefit	Dublin	November 2003
Carers	Longford	December 2003

Customer Panels 2001 to date

Type	Area	Meeting Dates
Retirement/Old Age Contributory Pension	Limerick	January 2001 February 2001 May 2001 November 2001
Widows/Widowers	Tullamore	December 2001
Unemployed	Cobh	December 2001
Unemployed	Limerick	February 2001 November 2001
Disability/Carers	Dundalk	September 2001 December 2001
Disability/Carers	Kilkenny	May 2002 July 2002 September 2002 December 2002
Retirement/Old Age Contributory Pension	Limerick	May 2002 October 2002
Unemployed	Limerick	May 2002
Widows/Widowers	Tullamore	May 2002
Free Schemes	Letterkenny	November 2002
Unemployed	Bishop's Square	February 2003 April 2003 June 2003
One Parent Family Payment	Tallaght	March 2003
Unemployed	Tallaght	March 2003 April 2003
MABS	Bishop's Square	November 2003 December 2003
MABS	Bishop's Square	January 2004 February 2004
Unemployed	Cork	March 2004
Multi Scheme	Coolock	May 2004

Appendix 3

Classification of all the Departmental Schemes

1. Retired and Elderly

Retirement Pension	Pre-Retirement Allowance
Old Age (Contributory) Pension	Old Age (Non-Contributory) Pension

2. Widows, Widowers and One-Parent Families

Widow or Widower's (Contributory) Pension	Widow or Widower's (Non-Contributory) Pension
One-Parent Family Payment	Bereavement Grant
Widowed Parent Grant	

3. Child-Related Payments

Maternity Benefit	Health and Safety Benefit
Adoptive Benefit	Orphan's (Contributory) Allowance
Orphan's (Non-Contributory) Allowance	Child Benefit

4. Illness, Disability and Caring

Disability Benefit	Invalidity Pension
Disability Allowance	Carer's Allowance
Carer's Benefit	Blind Pension

5. Occupational Injuries Benefit

Injury Benefit	Disablement Benefit
Medical Care	Death Benefit
Funeral Grant	Unemployability Supplement

6. Unemployment and Employment Support Services

Unemployment Benefit	Unemployment Assistance
Family Income Supplement	Back to Work (Employees) Allowance
Part-time Job Incentive Scheme	Back to Education Allowance
Back to Work (Enterprise) Allowance	Farm Assist

7. Basic Income Support

Supplementary Welfare Allowance

8. Miscellaneous Benefits, Allowances and Services

Treatment Benefits (optical and dental benefit and hearing aids)	Back to School Clothing & Footwear Scheme
Rent Allowance	Family Support Agency Services
Fuel Allowance	Smokeless Fuel Allowance
School Meals	Free Travel
Homemakers	Household Benefits

Appendix 4

Acknowledgements

Quality Customer Services Unit would like to extend their thanks and appreciation to the following for their assistance in participating in the extensive consultation process for the Department's Customer Charter and Customer Action Plan (June 2003 to January 2004).

Local Office Staff

Social Welfare Inspectors

Branch Office Managers

Regional Director's Office

Customer Service Liaison Officers

Partnership Committee

PSO Sligo Phone Bank

Medical Assessors and Medical Review & Assessment Section (DSFA)

Switchboard Operators

Galway Focus Groups – Representative Bodies

Young Mothers In Education	Springboard Initiative
Enable Ireland	National Council for the Blind
Irish Wheelchair Association	Galway Contact
National Association for Deaf People	COPE
Galway Carers Association	Western Womens Link
Western Council of Active Retired Groups	ICA Galway Federation
Westside CDP	Waterside Refuge
Galway Travellers Support Group	Galway Refugee Support Group
Irish Farmers Association	Galway Simon Community
Adult Literacy Group	INOUE
Money Advice & Budgeting Service	Galway City Partnership
Galway City Local Employment Service	Centre Independent Living
Citizens Information Centre	Conradh na Gaeilge
West Training Ltd.	DSFA Western Regional Office

Business Interests (Joint Revenue and DSFA)

Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC)	Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME)
Small Firms Association (SFA)	Construction Industry Federation (CIF)

Further copies of the Customer Action Plan are available from:

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