



CONSULTING WITH OUR CUSTOMERS

A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS OF A NATIONAL
INDEPENDENT CUSTOMER SURVEY – 2005

Department of Social and Family Affairs

An Roinn Gnóthaí Sóisialacha agus Teaghlaigh

www.welfare.ie



The Department of Social and Family Affairs is committed to:

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

CUSTOMER ACTION PLAN 2004-2007

Introduction

→ Customer Consultation

Ensuring that people know about their rights and entitlements and listening to customers' views about the services provided are important priorities for the Department in delivering a quality customer service. A number of different mechanisms are used to consult with customers and to get their feedback. These include customer panel meetings, comments and complaints procedures, customer surveys and day-to-day contact.

In addition, every five years, the Department commissions an independent customer survey. This gives customers the opportunity to tell us their views about the quality of service they have received and to let us know about areas where improvements could be made.

→ The Survey

This survey, which was undertaken during the period September to December 2005, was designed to give the Department feedback on how its customer base feel about a wide range of service issues and included:

- Overall service delivery
- Claim processing
- Information delivery
- Communications
- Personal Public Service Number (PPSN)
- Office facilities
- Payments

It involved a sample of 1,018 customers who were representative of the following five main customer groups:

- Disability and long term illness
- Old Age Pensioners
- One Parent Families
- Unemployed
- Carers

The main objectives of the survey were to:

- measure current levels of customer satisfaction with the Department's services
- identify areas for future development in terms of claims processing, payment and information services and to obtain information to aid the future development of the service.
- address some additional areas of the Department's operations including customer perceptions of delivery of services in the Irish language; usage of the PPS number; 'support to work' schemes; child benefit changes; and how the Department deals with control issues.

Main Findings Of The Survey

→ Overall Service Provided by the Department

Customers were asked to rate their overall level of satisfaction with services provided: **88%** of customers rated themselves as either very or fairly satisfied. This represents an increase of 4% compared to the 2001 survey results. The high level of satisfaction with the overall service received is reflected in high levels of satisfaction with the staff of the Department, the facilities in social welfare offices, communications, and information provision.

→ Claim Processing

Making a Claim

When making a claim, the vast majority (**92%**) of claimants, would choose a social welfare office as their first point of contact, either face-to-face, by phone or by written correspondence. This shows a marginal increase since 2001 (**90%**). Only a small minority (**7%**) would go elsewhere. Of those who would go elsewhere for help and advice, a Community Welfare Officer or a Citizens Information Centre was frequently cited.

A high proportion of claimants were very satisfied or satisfied with the way the Department staff dealt with their claim application, particularly in terms of their manner and politeness.

Completing Forms

Customers were asked if they found forms easy to complete: **84%** considered the application forms very easy or easy to complete. This figure has increased significantly since the last survey in 2001 (**74%**). The increase coincides with the implementation of the Department's "*Plain English*" policy which was initiated in 2004. The increase of 10% suggests that this policy is successful.

Waiting time for a decision

While the majority of customers (**67%**) were happy with the time taken to process their claim, this represents a decrease compared to 2001 when 78% were satisfied with the timing of their first payment. Overall, the average waiting time between applying and receiving first payments was just over five weeks.

Entitlements

Although the majority of more recent claimants (**66%**) believed that they had received all their entitlements at the time they applied for benefit, **23%** believed that they had not been told about everything that might have applied to them in their particular situation.

Means Test

Half of the customers surveyed had undergone a means test as part of their claim process. Of these, **82%** had no problem with the questions asked, regarding them as reasonable.

Notification of the decision

Some **79%** of claimants recalled receiving a letter from the Department setting out the amount of payment they would receive. Of those, **70%** found the contents “very clear” and a further **27%** found them “fairly clear”.

→ Information

Corporate Identity

All respondents were shown a number of logos and asked to pick out which one they thought was the Department’s logo. A majority (**70%**) of claimants correctly identified the Department’s logo.

Access to Information

Satisfaction with the information received when contacting the Department was high: **82%** of customers felt satisfied with the information received. The majority (**70%**) of customers prefer to go directly to the Department when looking for social welfare information. A further **6%** of those surveyed would go to a Citizens Information Centre.

Leaflets

The Department's booklets and leaflets were highly rated by the **50%** of those surveyed who had read them: **17%** of customers rated them as 'excellent' while the other **73%** rated them as either 'very good' or 'good'.

Internet Access

The percentage of customers who use the Internet has increased from **9%** to **17%** since the 2001 survey. These customers indicated they would be most interested in using the Internet to request a form from the Department, while over half would be willing to use the Internet to make an enquiry or notify the Department of a change in circumstances. The findings indicate that interest in using the Internet to interact with the Department is reasonably high.

Communications

Some **52%** of all customers preferred to contact the Department by telephone. And with regard to communication by telephone most people expressed satisfaction with the politeness of staff, the speed of response and the ability to resolve customer queries. Overall satisfaction with the phone service was **68%**.

The methods of communicating with customers are being reviewed by the Department at present and part of the examination will address how to heighten awareness of the LoCall telephone numbers.

Staff

Customers were asked to rate their satisfaction levels with staff of the Department under a number of headings:

- overall manner and politeness
- helpfulness of staff
- ability to provide information

Overall, **88%** responded positively to the manner and politeness of the staff who dealt with their claim, and **86%** responded similarly to the explanations given and the helpfulness of staff.

Irish

Awareness of the entitlement to avail of an Irish language service was **42%**, with just **3%** claiming that they would like to deal with the Department through Irish.

Child Benefit

Just under half of customers surveyed had been in contact with Child Benefit Section in the last two years. The main method of communication was through correspondence (**47%**) followed closely by the telephone (**41%**). Those who contacted the Child Benefit Section by telephone were generally happy with the service provided.

Awareness of obligations

The vast majority (**97%**) of customers claimed to be aware of their obligation to notify the Department of changes in their circumstances.

Employment Supports

Customers were asked if they were aware of services and supports available to encourage people to go back to work or to stay in work: **68%** of customers surveyed were aware of Family Income Supplement and **67%** were aware of the Back to Work scheme. The awareness levels of other services were lower. There was a **46%** awareness level for the part-time Job Incentive Scheme and **40%** for the Technical Assistance & Training Grants.

→ Personal Public Service Number (PPS No.)

There has been a significant improvement in awareness levels of the PPS number since the last survey. A substantial majority (**86%**) are aware of what a PPS number is. A similarly high percentage (**81%**) know where to find or check for their own number.

→ Office Facilities

Of those surveyed, **75%** of customers had visited their local social welfare office. Facilities available at the offices are generally perceived in a positive light, although there are some areas where customers feel improvements could be made. Customers cited queuing and privacy as issues of concern.

→ Payments

Satisfaction levels with current payment methods remains very high at **96%**. The preferred method for collecting a payment is at the Post Office: **66%** of customers use this method. A further **24%** have their payments paid into a bank account. The remaining **10%** receive their payment by cheque.

→ Conclusion

It is clear that improvements have been made in a number of areas since the 2001 survey:

- Overall satisfaction levels with services have increased
- There have been significant improvements in customer satisfaction with forms, leaflets and written communication from the Department
- There has been a dramatic increase in awareness of the use of the PPS Number

However, the survey findings reveal certain areas which require improvement. These include,

- low awareness of the Department's LoCall telephone numbers
- the time taken to decide claims, and
- queuing and privacy arrangements in local offices of the Department

The Department of Social and Family Affairs is committed to delivering a quality customer service to all its customers and will continue to address the findings from our customer surveys in the context of our customer services strategies.

www.welfare.ie

September 2006