

# **Listening to our Customers**

A summary of MRBI Survey Findings - 2001

LOGO

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs

**The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is committed to:**

- delivering quality services to its customers with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay
- creating a positive working environment for its staff
- fostering a climate of mutual respect between staff and customer

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May 2001

## **The Work of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs**

The main functions of the Department are to formulate appropriate social protection policies and to administer and manage the delivery of statutory and non-statutory social, community and family schemes and services.

For many years now the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has been putting quality customer service at the top of its list of priorities. This is not surprising in an organisation which provides supports and services for all citizens from "the cradle to the grave". In carrying out this function we make payments to over 874,000 people each week and process 1.7 million claim transactions annually.

The Department is committed to delivering quality customer service and to ensuring continuous improvement in the standards of service we provide.

### **The Importance of Customer Service**

The provision of quality customer service is one of the key objectives of the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI) the programme for modernisation of the Irish Public Service. The SMI objectives require each Department to examine its role in relation to:

- delivering better quality service to the public
- providing better value to the taxpayer
- improving its contribution to national economic and social development.

A number of initiatives have been introduced by the Department in recent years which have been aimed at improving the quality of service provided to our customers.

Among these have been:

Measuring and monitoring our performance on a regular basis in the areas of claim processing times, telephone response times and savings from control of fraud and abuse and responding to these findings

Carrying out a systematic programme of customer surveys with over 40 surveys taking place to date

Setting up and operating customer panels where customers meet

officials regarding their needs and concerns

Making customer comment cards available in the Department's offices to improve feedback. The availability of a customer comment and complaint card will be publicised as part of the introduction of a formalised comment and complaint system later this year.

Implementing the Department's Building Programme involving the provision of new and refurbished public offices

Delivering a Customer Service Training Programme for staff particularly those dealing directly with customers

Providing choice for customers, where possible, for example in relation to methods of payment

Initiatives at central and local level to improve co-ordination of public services between the Department and other agencies

Provision of an independent Social Welfare Appeals Office for customers who are dissatisfied with a decision on entitlement to payment.

The provision of comprehensive, accurate information in a clear and simple manner is an essential element in the effective delivery of social welfare services. Recently the Department has been issuing information newsletters to customers and will be using this method to inform all citizens about the Department's services in the near future.

## **Customer Consultation**

Our customer consultation and feedback mechanisms, which involve day-to-day contacts, surveys, panels and comment cards, have been an integral part of our business in recent years. Since 1994 just under 40 customer surveys have been carried out around the country while approximately 50 customer panel meetings have been held. Both panels and surveys involve a wide variety of customers including people claiming pensions, unemployment payments, lone parents and Disability and Carer's Allowance.

## **The Surveys**

As part of the programme of consultation with customers the Department from time to time arranges for an independent survey of customers to ascertain their views about the quality of service, areas where improvements might be made etc. The objective of the 2001 research was to obtain new information on our customers' opinion of the service we deliver (including views on the future development of the service)

The survey involved a sample of 997 customers who were representative of four main customer groups:

- Old Age Pensioners
- One Parent Families (including widows/widowers)
- Disability payment recipients
- Unemployment payment recipients

The broad areas covered in the survey were as follows:

- overall service delivery
- claim processing
- ongoing payment
- communication
- information
- office facilities

## The Survey Findings

The customer survey examined the perceptions of the Department's customers concerning the nature and level of the service provided.

### *The Service provided by the Department*

- **Overall level of satisfaction with service .....84%**

49% were very satisfied and 35% were fairly satisfied. This is consistent with the findings of our internal customer surveys which are in the main very positive. The Department is committed to continuously improving its services. An outline of planned key action points can be found in the Department's Customer Action Plan 2001 – 2004.

### *Making a Claim*

- **Customers who would go to, write to or phone a Social Welfare Office first if they need to make a claim ..... 90%**

This shows that the vast majority of customers would see an approach to the Department as being the most appropriate route when making a claim.

- **Percentage who found completing application forms to be quite easy/ straightforward ..... 74%**

We acknowledge that for some there can be difficulty in completing forms. The Service Delivery Model which sets the framework for delivery of social welfare services in the future, will reduce the amount of form filling. The system will produce a personalised form for the customer from information held by the Department and/or received from the customer by telephone. The customer will only have to complete the elements of the form where additional information is required.

- **Level of satisfaction with time taken to decide claims .....78%**

Performance Indicators in the areas of claim processing, telephone response times and correspondence have been developed. The performance standards are monitored on a monthly basis and updated annually. The standards and performance levels achieved are published in the Department's annual reports.

## ***Payment***

- **Satisfaction with method of payment .....96%**

Satisfaction with payment methods is very high. For most customers, the post office is their current source of payment and generally it is regarded as convenient and direct.

## ***Information***

- **Percentage of people who see contacting the Department directly as the best source of Social Welfare information .....74%**

The Department recognises the need for an independent information, advice and advocacy service and in this regard the agency, Comhairle under the aegis of the Department is responsible for this service.

- **Percentage of those who were satisfied with the information received .....90%**

## ***Social Welfare Offices***

***There is general satisfaction with facilities at Social Welfare Offices particularly in the following areas:***

seating availability,  
areas for completing forms,  
ease of access to building,  
display of information leaflets,  
areas for getting information,  
queues and sign-posting within social welfare offices.

While great improvements in facilities have been achieved, the Department is aware that there is still room for further improvement, particularly in terms of greater privacy through meeting rooms. These areas are being addressed in the Building and Refurbishment Programme as part of the Department's Customer Action Plan 2001 – 2004.

## **Staff**

The survey asked specific questions regarding the quality of service provided by staff. The survey shows that there is a high level of satisfaction with staff in the following areas:

courtesy,  
ability to handle complaints,  
ability to provide information,  
number of staff available and ability to listen.

The survey findings, related to the Department's offices and staff, clearly demonstrate that the facilities and service offered have improved. The Department is committed to continuously supporting staff through training and other initiatives.

It is recognised, however, that there is always room for further improvement and we will continue to strive to achieve those improvements.

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 members from across the Department and following research into best practice in other service delivery organisations and feedback from our customers and their representative organisations.

Customer Service Training will continue to be a central feature of the Department's training and development programme. It is included in induction training and, in various aspects, is featured in training for specific job types within the organisation.

## **Communicating with the Department**

**‘ Percentage of customers who said that they received a letter setting out the amount to be paid .....77%**

**. Percentage of customers who said they got all entitlements when making a claim .....62%.**

**Over the last number of years the Department has been making particular efforts to improve communication with its customers. We will continue to give special attention to communicating with our customers.**

- **Percentage of customers who have a preference for dealing with the Department through Irish .....2%**

### **Future Service Delivery Developments**

- . **Awareness of Personal Public Service No.....15%**

**It is clear from these findings that the Department will need to publicise the existence and purpose of the PPS No.**

- . **Awareness that Payments will be in EURO .....87%**

- **Customers who have internet access at home .....9%**
- **Customers who envisage communicating via e-mail with the Department in the future .....10%**

**These findings raise issues regarding future service delivery developments.**

### **Conclusions**

The findings of the 2001 survey are in the main very positive. They show that the Department has a strong focus on providing excellent customer service and that customers on the whole acknowledge that. There are some areas where improvements are needed and these are being addressed as outlined in the Customer Action Plan 2001 – 2004..

### **Information**

The Department's policy on information is to provide up to date, accurate and comprehensive information through a variety of methods. In this regard a key feature of the information programme is the provision of information by locally based Information Officers. Through Comhairle, the Department promotes and supports the development of independent information advice and advocacy services.

## **Consultation**

We place a high priority on consultation with and feedback from our customers. By obtaining the views of our customers we can understand their needs and expectations so that our policies and services reflect, and are responsive to, the requirements of individuals, families and communities.

Particular emphasis will be placed on further progression of the areas of consultation, complaints and redress. It is recognised that the current complaint procedures in the Department need to be developed and formalised and a formal customer service comments and complaints system is due to be introduced by the end of 2001. It will form part of the wider programme of customer consultation and feedback.

The Department's Customer Action Plan 2001-2004 will build on the substantial progress already made and detail how we will give effect to the new Principles of Quality Customer Service over the next three years. In summary the Department will continue seeking to improve the quality of the service provided to all our customers.