



**Quality Customer  
Service Network**

# Customer Action Plans & Charters



## **Guidelines for preparation**

Prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform



**Rialtas na hÉireann**  
Government of Ireland



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# Foreword

We are pleased to publish this updated version of *Customer Action Plans & Charters: Guidelines for Preparation*, in support of the Quality Customer Service (QCS) Initiative. This is a practical guide for Public Service organisations in approaching the production of these pivotal customer service documents, and sets out the process in a straightforward manner.

In December 2017, we launched *Our Public Service 2020 (OPS2020)*, establishing an overall strategy for development and innovation in the Public Service.



**OPS2020 is built on three central pillars:**

- Delivering for our Public;
- Innovating for our Future; and,
- Developing our People and Organisations.

This new phase of reform aims to build a stronger Public Service, and to deliver better quality services to the Irish public. The framework has a strong focus on outcomes to promote sustainable progress. Implementation began in 2018.

<b>Delivering for Our Public</b> 	<b>1</b>	Accelerate digital delivery of services
	<b>2</b>	Improve services for our customers
	<b>3</b>	Make services more accessible to all
	<b>4</b>	Significantly improve communications and engagement with the public
	<b>5</b>	Drive efficiency and effectiveness

The Quality Customer Service Initiative supports **Pillar 1: Delivering for our Public**, and specifically *Action 2: Improve Services for our Customers*.

Customer Action Plans and Charters give customers a clear and comprehensive statement of the service they can expect from Public Service

organisations, as well as the means to engage more effectively. These documents set out the customer service standards an organisation has set for itself, with the means of evaluation and indicators of success clearly detailed. These publications also help staff recognise the importance of customer service in their work, and see the benefit of supporting excellent Quality Customer Service standards in their organisation.

These comprehensive *Guidelines* have been updated to reflect current best practice on consultation and evaluation, as well as adding helpful appendices to aid Public Service organisations in their approach to the production of Action Plans and Charters.

This fourth iteration of the *Guidelines* is a welcome tool in the process of further embedding Quality Customer Service in the Public Service, and we are grateful for the continued commitment of the QCS Officers' Network. We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Network, along with the QCS Steering Group made up of Public Service representatives, for their support in the production of these *Guidelines*.



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 Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform

December, 2018



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# Overview: Customer Action Plans and Charters

## Introduction and Background

The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide Public Service organisations with practical assistance in the preparation of Customer Action Plans (Action Plans) and Charters.

Customer Action Plans and Charters are key documents in setting out service standards for your customer base, communicating that information to your customer, and putting in place a means of evaluating and reporting on your performance.

Just as Strategy Statements provide an opportunity for organisations to set out their overall response to reform and other objectives in a coherent manner, the Action Plan is an essential tool for each organisation to outline its Quality Customer Service (QCS) response to specific service delivery objectives and commitments.

Customer Action Plans should be produced as part of the same process as Customer Charters and published every 3 years, or where there is a strong business case for a new Action Plan and Charter.

Action Plans have been published within the Civil Service since 1997, and there are plenty of good examples around the system. Some examples of current Action Plans and Charters can be found in Appendix D. Further information can also be found through Quality Customer Service Officers/Units and the Quality Customer Service Network.

These Guidelines have been developed to incorporate best practice that has been identified over the lifetime of Action Plans and Charters, and to reflect both commitments to *Our Public Service 2020 (OPS2020) Development and Innovation Framework* (Dec. 2017), and developments in customer service delivery. Consideration should also be given to the 12 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service, set out in Appendix C.

## What is Quality Customer Service (QCS)?

The Quality Customer Service Initiative was established in 1997, setting out 9 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service - expanded to 12 in 2000, (see below). The Quality Customer Service Network was also established in 2000 to develop, promote and implement the Quality Customer Service Initiative. The Network meets regularly throughout the year, facilitated by the Reform and Delivery Office, Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The Network offers a platform for identifying best practice in customer

services, and sharing learning across the public service. Quality Customer Service Officers, who attend the Network as representatives of their organisations, oversee customer service standards in their organisations, including producing Customer Action Plans and Charters as per the Customer Charter Initiative, launched in 2002. The 12 Guiding Principles of QCS are shown in the diagram below. Further details on these Principles can be found in Appendix C.

Quality Service Standards	Equality/Diversity	Physical Access
Information	Timeliness and Courtesy	Complaints
Appeals	Consultation & Evaluation	Choice
Official Languages Equality	Better Co-ordination	Internal Customer

At the heart of the OPS2020 framework is a focus on three commitments to change: Delivering for our Public; Innovating for our Future; and, Developing our People and Organisations. In *Delivering for our Public*, the framework commits to “support the delivery of a quality service to the public and ensure effective feedback tools are in place to survey customer experience, identify areas needing improvement and follow-up to check if those improvements are being delivered.”

The Customer Action Plan and Charter should outline the arrangements which have been put in place to mainstream QCS within the organisation through the Strategy Statement, Business Planning, Performance Management Development System (PMDS) and other strategic processes. The organisation must have the internal capacity and capability to achieve the objectives and targets of the Action Plan.

Organisations should oversee and manage the publication of Customer Action Plans and Charters in the non-commercial bodies under their aegis. Accordingly, the documents should provide an indication as to progress made to date, and future plans in this regard, listing the relevant bodies under their aegis that are also covered under the Action Plan and Charter.

## Equality/Diversity

In planning for customer services, there is a need to ensure quality service delivery to groups covered by equality legislation, as well as those socially excluded due to socio-economic and geographic factors.

Some of the organisations that may be a source of additional advice and information on these, and related issues, are set out in Appendix D.

## Official Languages Equality

The primary objective of the Official Languages Act, 2003, is to ensure better availability and a higher standard of public services through Irish. It places a statutory obligation on Public Service organisations to make specific provision for delivery of such services in a coherent and agreed fashion through a statutory planning framework. This is known as a ‘scheme’, and is agreed on a three-year renewable basis between the head of the organisation concerned and the Minister of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

The Act also specifies some basic general provisions of universal applicability, for example:

- » correspondence to be replied to in the language in which it was written;
- » providing information to the public in the Irish language, or in the Irish and English languages;
- » bilingual publication of certain key documents; and,
- » use of Irish in the courts.

The Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht provides guidelines for public bodies in relation to the preparation of draft schemes, which can be seen on its website - [www.chg.gov.ie](http://www.chg.gov.ie).

## Online Services

Organisations should make the best use of available and emerging technologies to facilitate improved access to information, and improved choice for customers, through the development of online services. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) strategies/plans should be closely aligned to the Action Plan/Charter process in identifying requirements for online services, planning for their implementation, monitoring progress made and reporting on the process. The importance of ‘Digital First’ is reiterated in OPS2020, with a focus on using online channels to facilitate engagement and communications with customers and, ultimately, improve service delivery. All services should be represented on the unified [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) platform, where Government Departments should have regard to the associated online content guidelines - see Appendix D for links.

## Legal issues

It should be noted that the Customer Action Plan and Charter is not intended to create any new legal rights for customers. Organisations already commit to service standards for their customers in Strategy Statements, Business Plans and elsewhere.

However, it is possible that a member of the public could attempt to rely on a service standard contained in an Action Plan or Charter as a legally enforceable right. Therefore, in certain instances, organisations may wish to consider the need to make clear, in the phrasing of commitments or otherwise, that service standards are not intended to create or confer any new legal rights. Organisations should be aware that although the

intention is not to create or confer any new legal rights, the possibility that commitment to specific service standards could give rise to legal rights cannot be excluded.

## Customer Action Plans and Charters



1. **Consultation** with customers/stakeholders;
2. **Commitment** to service standards;
3. **Evaluation** of performance; and
4. **Reporting** on results.

## What is a Customer Action Plan?

A Customer Action Plan (Action Plan) describes in detail how the commitments and standards of quality customer service will be delivered and evaluated by an organisation.

While organisations may wish to adopt different approaches, the Action Plan is likely to describe:

- » the process by which customers are/will be consulted;
- » responsibilities within the organisation for delivering on commitments, and,
- » more detailed performance indicators, which will be evaluated and reported on.

The new Action Plan should cover the three year period following publication, coinciding with the term of the organisation's Strategy Statement. The Strategy Statement, as well as the other elements of the strategic planning process, should be used to prioritise and support customer service

commitments on a continuous and mutually reinforcing basis.

There should be a clear and effective linkage between the Action Plan and the goals, objectives and strategies associated with service delivery in the Strategy Statement, as well as in current reform delivery plans.

The Action Plan should clearly set out:

- » the functions of the organisation;
- » the services it delivers to its customers; and,
- » the impacts or outcomes of that public policy (e.g., health outcomes, public safety, standards of literacy), where meaningful.

Having regard to the **12 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service**, (Appendix C), the Action Plan should reflect the organisation's commitment to quality service delivery to both its internal and external customers.

Planned progress under each Principle should be accompanied by **specific objectives and targets, with related performance indicators**, to allow for ongoing monitoring and assessment of activity and achievement during the term of the Action Plan.

The ongoing involvement and commitment of senior management is essential in formulating and implementing policy on customer service. Linking the Action Plans to reform plans, the Strategy Statement, Business Planning, and PMDS processes is a way of embedding QCS at all levels of the organisation, and these processes should also be driven by a commitment to excellent service.

While the Customer Charter is intended to address the external customer's needs and responsibilities, the Action Plan should also consider the needs of **internal customers**. For QCS to be truly integrated into everything an organisation does, and to ensure best possible service to the external customer, the treatment of the internal customer must also be addressed in a substantive way.

These Guidelines set out a process by which the Customer Action Plan and Charter can be compiled, described in detail in the following chapters.

## What is a Customer Charter?

A Customer Charter is a short statement providing guidance and information on contacting a Public Service organisation, and describes the level of service a customer can expect.

Every Customer Charter should:

- » state the organisation's commitment to providing services to its customers in accordance with the 12 Guiding Principles of QCS, and in line with OPS2020. This might take the form of a short mission statement, and description of the services provided;
- » define service standards in clear terms and simple language - using Plain English where possible;
- » include necessary contact details;
- » inform customers how to give feedback - compliments, comments, complaints or suggestions. Include, if appropriate, forms of external redress/appeal; and,
- » include the date of the Customer Charter.

Each organisation will need to tailor its approach to its own circumstances and customer base. The Customer Charter might cover an entire organisation, or relate to a specific service area or section, as well as addressing the needs of specific customer groups.

The Customer Charter may also define customer responsibilities in contacting a Public Service organisation - for example, to keep appointments, to provide correct information, and to treat staff in a respectful manner. For more information, see page 18 of Section 5: *Compliments, Comments and Complaints*.

A Customer Charter should not seek to cover everything an organisation does. It should instead focus on what is important to its customers, or focus on internal processes or policies to achieve the service standards.

## What should a Customer Charter look like?

Given that Action Plans have been produced since 1997, and Customer Charters since 2003, there are plenty of examples available on websites or through Quality Customer Service Offices, which are also available to advise on QCS issues generally. There is a suggested template for a single-paged Customer Charter included at Appendix A, as well as examples of current Action Plans and Charters in Appendix D.

Key factors in a successful Customer Charter are visibility and accessibility. The Customer Charter should be a concise, easy-to-read document, and could take the form of a brochure and/or a poster. At a minimum, the Customer Charter is likely to include:

- » the reason why the Customer Charter was put in place, (to improve customer service by setting out and measuring customer service levels);
- » a description of the minimum service standards to which the organisation is committing;
- » the mechanisms available to customers to submit compliments, comments or complaints; and,
- » contact details (phone, address and e-mail).

The Charter should be a short document, detailing the key customer service commitments of an organisation, contact details, and avenues for compliments, comments and complaints.



## What is the relationship between a Customer Action Plan and Charter?

Customer Action Plans and Charters should be produced as part of the same process, and should share the same timeframe. While both are part of the same initiative, they have separate but complementary roles. The Customer Charter is a short, easy to read, accessible document which acts as a public commitment to the customer on the level of service they can expect to receive when dealing with a particular Public Service organisation. The Action Plan is a more detailed document which describes how the Customer Charter commitments will be delivered and evaluated by the organisation.

### When should the next Customer Action Plan and Charter be prepared?

OPS2020 continues to drive the Quality Customer Service Initiative in the Public Service, and emphasises the need for organisations to *“review customer charters to ensure that they are ambitious and reflect their commitment to continual improvement in service delivery”*. New Action Plans and Charters should be produced every 3 years, or sooner when an organisation significantly changes its structures, the services it offers and/or how services are delivered. The Strategy Statement is a key document in this process, and the timeframe of the Action Plan and Charter reflects that of the Strategy Statement. That said, the other elements of the strategic planning process, (Business Plans, PMDS, Annual Reports, etc.), should also be used to prioritise and support customer service commitments on a continuous and mutually reinforcing basis.

### How should an organisation begin preparing a new Customer Action Plan and Charter?

Organisations should develop a structured approach to preparing the Customer Action Plan and Charter. This is likely to involve a number of steps:

- » discussions at senior management level (e.g. the Management Board) about the purpose of, and approach to, the initiative;
- » assigning overall responsibility for the task to a member of senior management;
- » adequately supporting the Action Plan and Charter initiative by ensuring adequate staff and, if required, financial resources;
- » establishing internal organisational structures for undertaking the task;
- » communicating with staff about the initiative;
- » ensuring that the process is linked to the wider business planning process within the organisation; and,
- » if appropriate, discussing the Customer Charter initiative with the relevant Minister at this stage.

In line with OPS2020, and its focus on measured outcomes, Action Plans and Charters should also have particular regard to consultation with customers, identification of service targets and channels, and reporting annually on progress made. The Charters should also focus on the use of Plain English and accessible language in delivering services. The *Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service* and the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) offer guidance on accessible language, (see Appendix D).

### Support for Public Service organisations in preparing Customer Action Plans and Charters

These Guidelines are a primary source of support for Public Service organisations. If you require specific examples of any of the tools or methodologies mentioned here, you should refer to the previous and existing Customer Action Plans and Charters produced in Public Service organisations, as well as referring to Appendix D.

The QCS Officers' Network and QCS Officers and Units offer sources of assistance and experience in approaching the Customer Action Plan and Charter process.

## Supports at organisational level

When organisations develop Customer Action Plans and Charters, and engage in more rigorous consultation, setting of standards, evaluation and reporting of progress made on customer service standards, they will also need to take into account the provision of support to staff. This should include the following three elements:

### 1. Communications

Improvement of customer service is the goal of Customer Action Plans and Charters, and it is essential that this be communicated at an organisational and business unit level.

### 2. Training

Customer Action Plans and Charters may create new demands on staff.

Even the preparation of the Action Plan and Charter itself may require some staff to develop skills in areas such as facilitation of customer consultation, analysis of survey results, etc. Customer service training should be targeted to provide staff with the skills that they will require to meet these demands. For example, OneLearning Training Centre in the Civil Service delivers a suite of customer service programmes that are designed to provide staff with the skills they need to fulfil the commitments of their Customer Charters.

### 3. Resources

The production and publication of a new Customer Action Plan and Charter represents an opportunity for organisations to give a renewed impetus to customer service and to raise the profile of QCS issues within the organisation.

## How should organisations tell customers about their Customer Action Plan and Charter?

Customer Action Plans and Charters should be produced in hard copy and electronic form and should, at a minimum, be easily accessed on organisational websites.

Organisations should not incur any significant expense in producing these documents, which can be printed internally where possible, and primarily made available online. Customer Action Plans and Charters should also be made available for viewing by interested parties in hard copy, if requested.

Below are some of the methods for the communication of Charters that organisations might wish to consider:

- » **Posters** in public and other offices (for both customers and staff);
- » **Leaflets** that can be sent to customers along with routine correspondence and made available in public offices;
- » **Website** links to display the Customer Charter prominently on the organisation's homepage. At a minimum, websites should have an easily-accessed link to the Charter and customer service information;
- » **Emails** could include a link to the Charter at the foot of emails;
- » **Pledge cards** can be printed with the main customer service commitments and contact details, on a small wallet-sized card;
- » **Meetings** with customers or representative bodies to inform them of the Customer Charter orally, or by handing out leaflets;
- » **Speaking Opportunities** can be used to outline the main elements of the Charter; and,
- » **Publications** produced by the organisation can incorporate information on customer service and the Customer Charter.

The Action Plan and Charter should be produced in as many formats as possible (where considered reasonable), and should be made available through a range of channels of communication. This is necessary to ensure that it is accessible to customers experiencing, or vulnerable to, poverty and social exclusion, and to those covered by equality legislation. Some organisations that may be a source of additional advice and information on these issues are included in Appendix D

# Section 1: Consultation

## Why Consult?

A core QCS Principle states that: *“In their dealings with the public, Civil Service Departments and Public Service offices will provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services”.*

Improved engagement and communication is also an important element of OPS2020.

By obtaining the views of customers, organisations can better understand their needs and expectations and ensure that policies and services reflect, and are responsive to, customer needs.

OPS2020's headline action on *Delivering for Our Public* states that; *“Central to effective engagement with the public is clear communication. The aim is for clarity on what the public service delivers, understanding on policy and resource decisions, ensuring the public are aware of their entitlements of the services offered and how to avail of them.”*

Although Customer Charters are primarily aimed at external customers, Action Plans should be used to consider how the needs of internal customers and staff are addressed.

Accordingly, the new Action Plan needs to give recognition to the importance of the internal customer and should clearly detail the service standards which the internal customer can expect over the term of the Plan.

## Service integration/cross-departmental issues

Many important policy issues cut across the remit of individual organisations and need a coordinated response. For such cross-departmental issues, there should be consultation between the organisations involved in tackling the issue to ensure that their respective Action Plans accurately reflect the role and objectives of each organisation in a way which is clear to the customer/user. The Action Plan of an organisation should highlight the issue, identify the other organisations involved and their respective roles in tackling the issue, and outline clearly their own objectives/targets for delivery of their part/element of the service.

## The benefits of consultation

Consultation is a two-way process and the parties stand to benefit greatly if it is conducted correctly. Specifically, consultation can help organisations to plan/prioritise services better to give customers what they want and make better use of resources. Consultation can also ensure that customers have a voice and role in service planning and delivery and, in that way, build the relationship between organisations and their customers that will allow greater information exchange in the future.

Consultation may be carried out by organisations specifically for the Customer Action Plan and Charter production process but should also be used as part of an ongoing process. Consultation requires long-term commitment to a process of continuous change and adaptation, and is not just a one-off event. Similarly, it is essential that the results of consultation are fed into the service planning process, (as well as Action Plans and Charters), in a meaningful way.

Organisations may have concerns that by engaging in a process of consultation, customer expectations will be increased and customer demands will be unreasonable. This need not be the case. If a consultation process is well run, it is possible to manage customer expectations. Experience shows that customers like to be asked for their opinion, and will generally give a reasonable and realistic input into the process.

## Who to consult

Before commencing the consultation process, organisations need to identify their customers. This is not always a simple task, and a broad definition of customers' needs should be considered to avoid excluding any groups. A customer may be someone who is, either directly or indirectly, the recipient of the services concerned and may be included under the categories set out below.

**External Customers** might include:

- » customers who are in receipt of the services your organisation provides;
- » persons who used your service in the past;
- » potential new customers;
- » other Public Service organisations, including local offices;
- » private sector organisations;
- » voluntary and community organisations;
- » consumer groups/focus groups/user panels;
- » representatives of specific customer groups.

**Internal Stakeholders** might also be consulted, including:

- » front line staff;
- » staff involved in designing services;
- » Customer Service Officers;
- » Complaints Officers;
- » other service providers in your organisation.

### Inclusive consultation

When consulting you should ensure that the process is representative of the full range of your customers, including:

- » customers from different geographical areas and socio-economic backgrounds;
- » customers who represent a broad range of industries, locations and sizes of enterprises (in relation to business customers);
- » customers covered by equality legislation.

## How to consult

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have published a set of *Consultation Guidelines* issued in December 2016, (linked in Appendix D), developed under Ireland's Open Government Partnership National Action Plan 2014-2016 and following a review of national and international consultation guidelines. In common with many other countries, they adopt a principles-based approach to public consultation. The aim is to improve transparency, responsiveness and accessibility of consultations.

The Guidance promotes three principles. Consultations should:

- 1. Be genuine and meaningful**
- 2. Be targeted at, and facilitate input from, all those with an interest**
- 3. Be considered at all stages in the policy process, including development, implementation and review**

## Methods of consultation

Consultation processes need to be planned and managed well, and one method alone might not give organisations all the information they require. The method of consultation chosen is very important and should be determined by the characteristics of those to be consulted, i.e. *the customers*, as well as the organisation's own experience, resources and capabilities.

There may also be opportunities for organisations to work together in consulting with customers who may interact with two or more organisations.

The type and degree of consultation will depend on a variety of factors, including:

- » the normal channels which your customers use to interact with your services;
- » the ease with which customers can engage with a particular method of consultation - this should take into consideration literacy, familiarity with the method being used, etc.; and,
- » the social and geographical spread of customers.

Below are some of the popular methods of consultation, which might be useful. It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive list, but rather some of the possible options open to organisations.

**Customer Surveys:** Questionnaire based surveys allow organisations to get views from a widely representative group of users, (and non-users), and can give statistically reliable information. It also allows organisations to assess progress and compare information year-on-year if using the same types of questions. In order to ensure that customer surveys are a meaningful and useful exercise, it is important that they are:

- » consistent in methodology, statistical reliability and frequency (annual, where possible);
- » independently undertaken, where possible;
- » focused on the key issues, including key drivers of satisfaction and dissatisfaction; and,
- » published results, which are seen to be used to design/plan customer services.

**Customer Panels:** These panels involve customers meeting the organisation to express their opinions on the services they received.

**Focus Groups:** Focus groups are normally made up of approximately 6–10 people led by a trained facilitator in a one-off discussion focused on a particular topic.

**Complaints Systems/Comment Cards:** These offer customers an immediate channel for compliments, comments, complaints and suggestions regarding the service they received. The primary purpose of the comment card is to provide information to staff quickly, so that operational problems can be corrected as soon as possible.

Similarly, complaints are actually a potential source of very useful quantitative and qualitative data on customer perceptions and opinion.

**Public Meetings:** Public meetings and open policy debates might be useful for members of the public to find out about, and express their views on, a particular issue.

**Mystery Shopping:** This can be used to test the quality of services by pretending to be a customer, and measuring service levels received.

## How to use the Consultation Results

Before engaging in any consultation process, an organisation has to be clear as to what will be done with the outputs of that process. Clear lines of action need to be established so that the outputs from the process are used to effect change. Without such channels, customers will feel that their input is not valued and will cease to engage fully with the process, and organisations will lose an opportunity to improve services. Failure to make use of consultation outputs will also be apparent when organisations seek customer input once more at measurement stage.

The likely outputs of any consultation process will fall into the following 3 categories.

1. The design of current services and their delivery mechanisms.
2. The introduction of new services.
3. Setting service standards - what levels of service the customers feel are required/important.

The consultation process should be an opportunity to plan the Customer Action Plan and Charter in light of customer input.

# Section 2: Service Standards

## What are Service Standards?

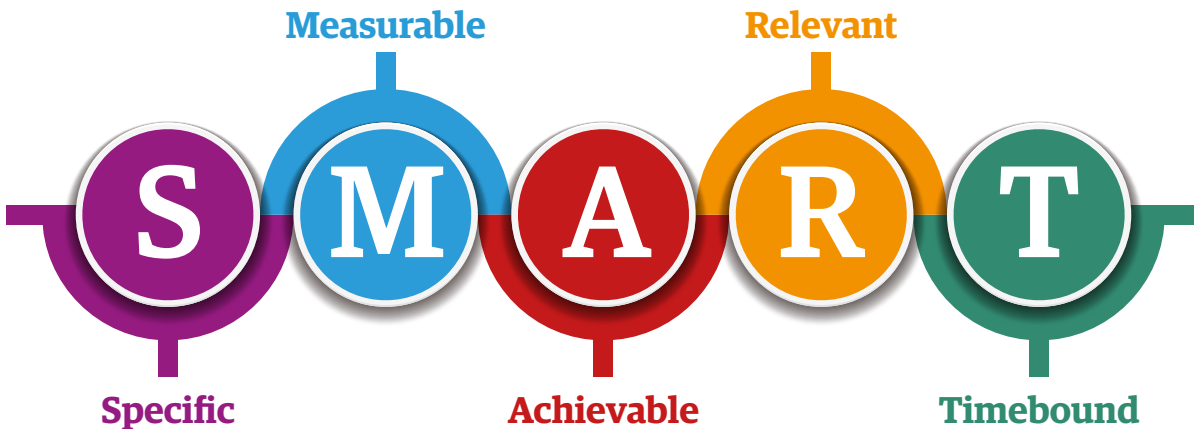
The next stage in the development of a Customer Action Plan and Charter is the setting of, and commitment to, Service Standards. Having consulted with customers and stakeholders, organisations will have a clear picture of customer expectations, which will allow organisations to set objective service standards. Organisations may also wish to note peak period pressures, where relevant, in setting Service Standards - during

these times of increased workload, the general Service Standard may not be maintained.

The first QCS Guiding Principle refers to *Quality Service Standards*, and requires organisations to: *“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”*.

## What is a Good Service Standard?

Good service standards are those set in consultation with customers. The ‘SMART’ acronym for setting personal performance indicators under the Performance Management and Development System can be useful in setting service standards for organisations. This means that, where possible, standards/ commitments should be:



**An example of a SMART objective might be:** *To acknowledge receipt of all written correspondence within 3 working days of receipt, and to issue a substantive response within 15 working days.*

## Performance Indicators for Service Delivery

The Strategy Statement shows how each Department and Office intends to implement the Government's high level policy objectives over the medium term. Building on this, and other elements of the strategic planning process, each Action Plan must include appropriate and meaningful performance indicators, specific to its area, to allow for the assessment and measurement of performance over the term of the Action Plan. This should be done in such a way that there is a degree of consistency between a Department's high level policy objectives and its Business Planning process, so that every public servant can see how their work is helping to achieve the wider Public Service objectives.

The performance targets should be realistic - challenging, but achievable. They must also be capable of showing whether the targets and objectives of the Action Plan have been achieved in relation to each of the Guiding Principles, (Appendix C). To be effective, it is essential that the indicators are monitored against targets regularly, with arrangements in place for reporting on performance.

Indicators should be drawn up in terms of:

- » **key outputs** - the goods and/or services produced as a result of pursuing the specified objectives and strategies; and,
- » **outcomes** - the benefits or changes for individuals or groups arising from pursuing a particular policy or policies.

These indicators will provide important information on service activities and the results that are being achieved. In developing relevant indicators, it should be noted that the focus of Public Service managers should be on public services. The indicators should emerge from that information which is required for the effective and efficient day-to-day management of a Public Service organisation or unit.

There are a number of complementary initiatives that will allow for the potential of meaningful performance management to be realised. In particular, IT and Analytics developments should be utilised to ensure that public services are planned in a more informed, integrated way, and delivered more cost-effectively.

The number and type of service standards will vary between organisations, due to the diversity of services each organisation provides. It is probably more effective to develop, implement and evaluate a smaller number of critical commitments, rather than to spread the effort over a wide range of them.

From their front line staff and from their customer consultation processes, organisations will be best placed to identify what aspects of customer service will have the greatest impact on overall customer satisfaction, and it is in these areas that organisations should focus their commitments. For example, if the majority of customers contact an organisation by telephone and a significant number are dissatisfied with an aspect of this service, then improving this aspect is likely to drive overall satisfaction more than setting service standards in other areas.

## Why set Service Standards?

There are many other benefits for an organisation in making commitments to service standards.

Setting commitments can:

- » clarify an organisation's objectives around customer service;
- » assist in evaluating how service has been delivered;
- » act as a trigger for remedial action if standards are not being met;
- » help determine where resources should be focused to improve service;
- » provide staff with feedback on what is expected of them; and,
- » highlight best internal practice.

## How to set service standards

Service standards should be set:

- » on the basis of what customers have identified as being important in improving their satisfaction with the services provided;
- » by looking at the *12 Guiding Principles*, (*Appendix C*), and seeing which ones lend themselves to commitments in a Customer Action Plan and Charter;
- » in partnership with the staff who will be delivering the service, and who are well positioned to judge what the customer wants;
- » to be both directly measurable by tracking systems, and indirectly measured by suitable performance indicators;
- » to be consistent with wider OPS2020 objectives.

## Meaningful Commitments

A number of important issues should be considered in the selection of service level commitments.

**Setting stretch targets:** Stated commitments and objectives will change over a 3-year period and should, therefore, be acknowledged as 'stretch targets' that are merely minimum standards, rather than the limit of an organisation's ambition. Stretch targets involve evolving and flexible objectives, which should focus organisations on doing even more than simply meeting them, and on improving performance above and beyond those minimum standards set out in Action Plans and Charters.

**Update regularly:** New customer service requirements, challenges and opportunities will arise over the lifetime of the Action Plans and Charters and these will need to be incorporated into the organisational commitments. Action Plans and Charters should evolve over their lifetime and are not meant to be static documents.

**Focus on quality, as well as quantity:**

Commitments should be more ambitious, moving beyond response times to other targets appropriate to the substance of the quality of service offered by individual organisations. This should focus on those issues that matter to customers.

**Highlight critical targets:** Charter targets should be a sub-set of some of the critical targets set out in Action Plans.

**Use measurement of results:** The results of service measurement and monitoring are used to identify more challenging customer service commitments.



# Section 3: Evaluation

## Why Evaluate?

QCS Guiding Principle 8, *Consultation and Evaluation*, states that Public Service organisations will “ensure meaningful evaluation of service delivery”.

Evaluation is the process of assessing the fulfilment, or surpassing, of the service standards set down in Customer Action Plans and Charters. Effective evaluation tells you what worked and what did not, and where greater attention might need to be focused. It is essential that organisations rigorously evaluate performance against the service standards set out in the Customer Action Plan and Charter in order to:

- » ensure accountability for delivery of those standards by organisations; and,
- » facilitate learning and continuous improvement in customer service.

## Reporting and Evaluating Progress

Arrangements should also be put in place in the organisation for ongoing monitoring of performance against the service delivery targets and stated outputs or results of the public policy standards. It is important to ensure that the results or outputs are planned, well defined, and delivered. The procedure for monitoring performance and reporting on progress against planned outputs in the Annual Report of the organisation should be clearly outlined in the Action Plan. A table outlining the service standards and the results or outputs achieved each year in meeting those standards should be published in the Annual Report.

The Action Plan should also outline the methods of evaluation which will be undertaken over the period of the Action Plan to assess performance. Consideration should be given to independent evaluation to establish metrics against which the organisation can measure its future performance.

## How to Evaluate Performance

There are a number of methods organisations can use to evaluate performance against the service standards they committed to in their Customer Action Plan and Charter. One method of evaluation alone might not be sufficient to evaluate an organisation’s performance because of the diversity and complexity of services some organisations provide.

As in the case of consultation, it may be possible for organisations to work together in seeking feedback from customers, rather than approaching the same customers on several occasions by different organisations seeking their views on the same issues.

In some cases, the service standard set down in the Customer Action Plan and Charter will not be directly measurable. These standards might be assessed through the use of **performance indicators** which measure the achievement of that service standard. Some examples of performance indicators can be seen below.

Service Standards	Performance Indicators/ Measurement Tools
100% of routine matters replied to within 20 working days	Output of correspondence tracking systems, or survey of a sample of correspondence dealt with
90% paid/refunded within 10 working days	Analysis of turnaround times for particular service, or sample of same
We will provide information in a range of languages, formats and media	Satisfaction levels with, and use of, information provided to customers covered by equality legislation
Complaints will be given a substantive reply within 10 working days	Number of cases dealt with and resolved within timeframe

In any evaluation, a mix of quantitative and qualitative measurements is preferable. Closed questions will give organisations statistical data on achievement of targets, while open-ended questions are better for getting specific new ideas for improvements to service.

### **Evaluation methods to be considered include:**

- » customer surveys;
- » customer panels/focus groups;
- » complaint systems;
- » comment cards;
- » face-to-face interviews;
- » mystery shopping;
- » tracking systems (e.g. telephone and correspondence tracking);
- » programme of Quality Assurance checks;
- » employee surveys/staff suggestion schemes; and
- » external validation or self-assessment schemes.

### **Surveys/Benchmarks**

Useful benchmarks of the general public and business community's satisfaction with levels of services provided by the Civil Service as a whole, for example, can be gauged through the periodic surveys undertaken by central Government, including the Civil Service Customer and Business Surveys. Organisations might wish to take issues that arise from these surveys - such as customer opinions, perceptions and satisfaction levels - on board, ensuring consistency and value from their own organisational surveys. Public Service organisations should take advantage of similar ongoing surveys and customer advocacy programmes to inform benchmarks of customer satisfaction within their own organisations.

### **International Trends**

Approaches to Customer Service are affected by customer expectations, changing habits, and developing technologies. It is useful to consult national and international research on the most up-to-date evaluation tools for customer service. Seeking out emerging trends in customer service and performance enables organisations to make better informed policy and strategy design decisions for the future, as well as remain relevant in their service-offering to their customers.

# Section 4: Reporting

## Why Report?

Under the Public Service Management Act, 1997, Departments and Offices are required to report annually on progress made in implementing their Strategy Statements. In most cases, this involves a published Annual Report. As part of this process, organisations should also report on progress made against service standards set out in their Customer Action Plans and Charters through the Annual Report.

## Who is Responsible for Reporting?

As with all steps in the process, arrangements within organisations should be made to ensure that the coordination of measurement, monitoring, and reporting of progress is clearly defined, with clear roles and responsibilities agreed for the staff involved.

This is an important means of ensuring accountability to the Oireachtas and the public for resources used, and as an opportunity to demonstrate and record improvements in service levels over time.

## How to Report

This reporting should be based on the output of the **Evaluation** carried out under the Customer Action Plan and Charter process, and should provide clear information on:

- » the service standards/performance indicators;
- » how performance has been measured (and the results, including details of complaints);
- » whether those standards have been achieved; and,
- » the next steps in the customer service improvement process.

Clarity and consistency are crucial aspects of reporting, especially where the process is continuous, and where customers and observers will be seeking to compare issues over time. Where service standards have not been met, it will be

necessary to identify how it is intended to meet those standards in the future.

As well as through Annual Reports, organisations should also take other opportunities to report on progress made on customer service issues. It is important to ensure that the information is made available to customers through other channels. Examples of these include leaflets, websites, and press releases. Whatever channels are used to inform customers of the Action Plan and Charters should also be used to inform them of performance levels.

OPS2020 promotes the use of online services to improve channels of delivery to customers, and to improve engagement and communications with customers. It is, therefore, important that all publications available for customers, including Customer Action Plans and Charters, are available in electronic format, including on organisations' websites.

In OPS2020, the Government also commits to continually drive the Customer Charter initiative across the Public Service. In order to ensure consistency, Customer Action Plans and Charters should be shared across the Public Service, particularly by organisations in the same sector.

It is also worth repeating the need to use plain language in Customer Charters, as well as in all communications with customers. The *Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service*, produced in 2017 by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in conjunction with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority, is a good resource for producing written, verbal and digital communication that is easy to access, understand and use. Further useful information can be found in Appendix D.

# Section 5: Compliments, Comments and Complaints

## Complaints Procedures

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

In some cases, an effective Customer Action Plan/Charter can actually increase the number of complaints received, as feedback is invited, and as customers become confident that their complaints are being listened to and acted upon. It is important, therefore, not to become discouraged if complaints rise in the short term, but rather to see this as a form of feedback that can be useful in highlighting areas of service delivery which can be improved.

All service delivery organisations are subject to complaints at both the level of the official and the organisation. These may relate to the quality of the service itself or the manner in which the service was delivered. The scope for customer dissatisfaction can be reduced by provision of appropriate information to the customer regarding the available service, and training to staff in how to deliver the service.

In setting up systems to deal with customer input, organisations should ensure that all complaints are dealt with objectively in a consistent, open and fair manner.

Some elements to be included in Complaints systems are included below.

- » Information regarding complaints procedures should be freely available to the public at all points of service delivery and should be publicised by organisations.
- » Complaints procedures should be straightforward, and access should be conveniently available to customers and clients at no cost wherever possible.
- » All complaints should be directed to, and acknowledged by, a named officer of appropriate grade.
- » Appropriate training should be provided to all staff dealing with complaints.

- » Complaints should be addressed as quickly as possible, and the customer should be kept informed of progress.
- » Complaints procedures should be subject to regular review.
- » Provision should be made for speedy correction of errors and, where required, the making of appropriate redress to the complainant.

## Feedback

Feedback from customers is an essential part of the Customer Charter Initiative.

Organisations should encourage customers to give feedback, (compliments, general comments and complaints), which helps customers feel that the organisations are committed to listening to them. Monitoring this information will help organisations identify problem areas. Organisations should ensure that they have good procedures for dealing with the feedback they receive.

In preparing and implementing the Customer Action Plan and Charter, organisations need to address how to encourage and use feedback, (complaints in particular), and how to ensure that it is responded to in a meaningful manner. Organisations should have clear and accessible complaint management procedures, which should be simple to understand and use.

The procedure should:

- » record the details of the complaint;
- » acknowledge the complaint;
- » investigate the complaint;
- » provide a response; and,
- » learn from the complaint.

It is also important that staff understand the mechanics and the rationale/usefulness of the complaints procedure. In this regard, organisations should encourage a 'learning culture', and approach feedback in a constructive and positive way. Organisations could publish details of complaints received and use it as a performance indicator, as well as a more qualitative method of customer feedback. Equally, compliments and comments can be fed back to staff to highlight areas of good practice, and to encourage quality customer service.

It is important to note that staff dealing with customers are entitled to courtesy and respect in the performance of their jobs. Organisations may wish to include a notice in their Action Plan and Charter referring to customer responsibility in contacting the organisation. This can take the form of a 'Customer Responsibilities' section in the Customer Charter, (see Charter Template at Appendix A).

# Appendix A: Template for Customer Charter

See below example of a recommended size for Customer Charters:  
Single paged document folded into a leaflet for display and distribution.

Front Page

**Compliments, Comments and Complaints**

If you wish to give feedback...

- If you are unhappy...
- How we deal with you...
- Acknowledge within...
- Answer within...
- Or, if it is not possible to answer the query immediately, we will...
- Details of Ombudsman

**How to Submit Compliments, Comments or Complaints**

- Visit...
- Talk to...
- Call us...
- Write to...


**How to Contact Us**

Address for Correspondence

Address for Public Office

Website Details


Phone Number(s)



**Customer Charter**

**2018-2020**

Prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform



Back Page

**Short Intro:** What this Customer Charter is, and where to find the Customer Action Plan. Include website link to further information.

**Customer Commitments**

**Level of service to expect when contacting or visiting the Organisation**

- How we treat you
- How we treat your information
- Our service standards
- Provision of services

**Reference to availability of translation, interpretation and/or Irish Sign Language facilities, where applicable.**

**Monitoring and Evaluation**

- How we monitor our performance
- Where we report on our performance
- Link to further information

**What to Expect When You Contact Us**

**Our information**

- What information we provide
- Where we provide it
- How we provide it

**When you contact us by letter or email**

- When we will respond
- How we will respond

**When you contact us by phone**

- How quickly we answer calls
- What information we should provide
- How we will connect you to information

**When you visit our Public Offices**

- Our commitments to access
- How we deal with you

**Customer Responsibilities**

**To make our service better, we ask that you:**

- Have certain information ready
- Give full information
- Give accurate information
- Treat our staff with courtesy and respect

**We Value Your Opinion**

To allow us to serve you better, we would like to hear from you. Let us know how we have performed, if we can do better, and how you think we could improve.

# Appendix B: Checklist for Action Plans and Charters

## PREPARATION - *Did you...*

- 
- Discuss the Action Plan and Charter at senior management level?
- Assign overall responsibility to a member of senior management?
- Establish structures for undertaking the process?
- Communicate with staff about the initiative?
- Ensure links with wider business planning and reform processes?
- Refer to appropriate legislation to ensure fairness of delivery?

## CONSULTATION - *Did you...*

- 
- Identify your customers?
- Refer to the *Consultation Guidelines*?
- Select the methods of consultation best suited to your customers?
- Ensure inclusivity in your consultation process?
- Isolate aspects of service with the greatest impact on customer satisfaction?
- Set outputs for the consultation process?

## SERVICE STANDARDS - *Did you...*

- 
- Refer to the 12 Guiding Principles of QCS?
- Use the SMART system for setting service standards?
- Ensure service standards reflect the results of consultation?
- Set realistic performance targets?
- Inform customers about your Action Plan and Charter?

## EVALUATION - *Did you...*

- 
- Put systems in place to evaluate standards and performance regularly?
- Use methods of evaluation that reflect your customers' needs?
- Include an element of external evaluation, if possible?
- Evaluate performance against the agreed service standards?
- Provide for a complaints procedure?
- Use your Customer Charter to invite feedback from customers?

## REPORTING - *Did you...*

- 
- Establish a means of reporting that can be repeated at regular intervals?
- Identify how your organisation will report progress to customers?
- Report on evaluation of service standards in your Annual Report?
- Plan for any necessary revision of service standards, based on results?

# Appendix C: 12 Guiding Principles of QCS

In their dealings with the public, Public Service organisations will take into account the following 12 Guiding Principles of QCS:

## 1. Quality Service Standards

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

## 2. Equality/Diversity

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

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

## 3. Physical Access

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

## 4. Information

Take a 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.

## 5. Timeliness and Courtesy

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

## 6. Complaints

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

## 7. Appeals

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

## 8. Consultation and Evaluation

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

## 9. Choice

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

## 10. Official Languages Equality

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

## 11. Better Co-ordination

Foster a more coordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public services.

## 12. Internal Customer

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



# Appendix D: Further Information

## Relevant Legislation

Official Languages Act, 2003	<a href="http://www.chg.gov.ie">www.chg.gov.ie</a>
Irish Sign Language Act, 2017	<a href="http://www.irishstatutebook.ie">www.irishstatutebook.ie</a>
Equal Status Acts 2000 - 2015	<a href="http://www.ihrec.ie">www.ihrec.ie</a>

## Accessibility and Plain English

Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service	<a href="http://www.per.gov.ie/customer-communications-toolkit">www.per.gov.ie/customer-communications-toolkit</a>
The National Adult Literacy Association	<a href="http://www.nala.ie">www.nala.ie</a>
The National Disability Authority	<a href="http://www.nda.ie">www.nda.ie</a>

## Useful Information

Quality Customer Service Initiative	<a href="http://www.per.gov.ie/quality-customer-service">www.per.gov.ie/quality-customer-service</a>
Our Public Service 2020	<a href="http://www.ops2020.gov.ie">www.ops2020.gov.ie</a>
Consultation Guidelines	<a href="http://www.per.gov.ie/consultation-guidelines">www.per.gov.ie/consultation-guidelines</a>
Gov.ie Content Guidelines	<a href="http://www.gov.ie/content">www.gov.ie/content</a>
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission	<a href="http://www.ihrec.ie">www.ihrec.ie</a>

## Examples of Action Plans and Charters (QCS Members)

Organisation	Comment	Website
<b>Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</b>	Detailed Action Plan, with list of organisations under their aegis	<a href="http://www.agriculture.gov.ie">www.agriculture.gov.ie</a>
<b>Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection</b>	Leaflet-sized Customer Charter	<a href="http://www.welfare.ie">www.welfare.ie</a>
<b>Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions</b>	Plain English emphasised through all publications	<a href="http://www.dppireland.ie">www.dppireland.ie</a>
<b>Public Appointments Service</b>	Action Plan includes Standards of Service Delivery table and plan for staff training	<a href="http://www.publicjobs.ie">www.publicjobs.ie</a>
<b>Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport</b>	Plain English stamp from NALA. List of offices, with access information	<a href="http://www.dttas.ie">www.dttas.ie</a>





