

CPMR Discussion Paper 11

**Improving Public Services in Ireland:
A Case-Study Approach**

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Introduction

1.1 Setting the Scene

Achieving a significant and on-going improvement in the quality of services delivered to the public is a key objective of the current programme of public service reform: the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI). The achievement of that objective will be a key performance indicator for the success of the SMI programme itself. 'The Government is committed to renewing public confidence in the system of government by the introduction of reforms in the delivery of public services. The type of public service which the Government is working to achieve can be summed up in one word: quality. Ireland needs and deserves a public service which operates to the highest standards, both in the quality of its decision-making and in the quality of service provided at the point of impact on the customer. This quality imperative applies at all levels of government' (*Better Local Government: A Programme for Change*, 1996).

This call is made at central government level. *Delivering Better Government* (1996) states, as a key objective, 'the achievement of an excellent service for the Government and the public as customers and clients at all levels. ... This is essential on social grounds because of the importance of the services provided by the Irish Civil Service to the well-being of the individual citizen and to the coherence of society as a whole'. *Delivering Better Government* (1996) also acknowledges that the achievement of excellence in customer service is essential for economic reasons because of the importance of such services for national competitiveness.

This call for improvement in service delivery is made even more forcefully at local government level. 'Government, including local government, exists to serve the people. However, in the public service, there is the danger that insufficient attention may be paid to the needs of the customer and that internal demands, preferences and perceptions of the organisation may take precedence. To counteract this, there is a need to establish systems to ensure that those responsible for the delivery of services are driven by the requirements of customer needs and customer satisfaction and that services are viewed from the customers', rather than the organisations', perspective. In this way, government is made more responsive and the customer better served' (*Better Local Government* 1996).

1.2 Study Background

This Discussion Paper is the second in a series that seeks to explore some of the key public management issues raised by responding positively to this challenge. The first Paper placed the current drive to improve the quality of services provided to the Irish public within a wider international context. It explored some of the important conceptual issues raised by the application of private sector approaches to the improved delivery of public services. It also evaluated some of the different types of approach adopted to date. These included the adoption of service charters, the improved integration of public service delivery and innovative methods of engaging with service users (see Humphreys 1998).

Its conclusions provided little room for complacency. ‘The research indicates quite clearly that, with some notable and noteworthy exceptions ... there is still a very long way to go before it can be asserted that Irish public service organisations have taken on board wholeheartedly the need to be customer focused throughout the design, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and review of the services delivered. Too often a very strong qualitative impression was gained that in many bodies still, despite the national initiatives already taken and the rising expectations amongst external customers themselves, a genuine commitment to addressing the needs of the general public remained relatively low in the pecking order of managerial priorities compared, for example, to meeting the internal political demands of the system. Rarely were customer needs placed centre stage’ (Humphreys 1998, p.77).

1.3 Research Rationale

Having identified this unsatisfactory situation, Humphreys (1998) noted that, ‘... given the comparatively early stage of meaningful developments to date, it is important to attempt to plot possible ways forward which will encourage rather than discourage those positive tendencies already developing within the Irish public service. It will also be important to facilitate the sharing of experience across the public service of constructive approaches to addressing customer needs within a realistic management context’ (pp. 77/8). To address these needs, the Committee for Public Management Research agreed that Phase Two of the research programme should adopt a case-study approach. Having outlined the major macro-level issues in Phase One, it was felt that an in-depth assessment was needed of best practice approaches to the effective mainstreaming of customer service values.

In so doing, it was recognised that mainstreaming a customer service ethos and approach within an organisation comparatively unfamiliar with engaging seriously with such values can pose searching questions for existing management and work practices. Indeed, the whole-hearted adoption of customer service values often requires nothing short of a fundamental reorientation of that organisation and a radical change in its prevailing culture. Little is known about effective strategies to achieve such change within an Irish public service context. Accordingly, Phase Two seeks to identify appropriate strategies and models of best practice, in Ireland and elsewhere, which have succeeded in tackling and/or are currently engaging effectively with the cultural and other organisational challenges involved.

1.4 Research Objectives and Approach

In plotting constructive and meaningful ways forward from this comparatively early stage of development for many Irish public service bodies, Phase Two has twin research objectives:

- to identify, evaluate and share the latest information on effective mainstreaming approaches being adopted within Ireland; and
- to identify, evaluate and share the latest information on new ideas and initiatives being developed elsewhere, which are both appropriate to Irish conditions and could demonstrate how customer needs can be placed at the centre of an organisation’s mission and vision.

By addressing these two linked objectives in a practical manner, Phase Two will aim to encourage discussion of the issues involved and to facilitate the wider adoption of customer service approaches throughout the Irish public service. In order to achieve these objectives, Phase Two included the following elements:

- A detailed review and evaluation of relevant Quality Customer Service and change management literature to identify key issues and assist in the development of an appropriate conceptual framework for the analysis of best practice case-studies.

- Collation and evaluation of international material on effective approaches to the mainstreaming of customer service values in the delivery of services. As well as international bodies, such material will primarily draw upon evidence available from North America, Australia, New Zealand, the Nordic Countries and the United Kingdom (UK).
- In-depth case study of central and local government organisations which have already made considerable progress with the adoption of a mainstreaming approach within Ireland. Within each case-study organisation, detailed discussions would be held with key personnel, including senior and line managers, as well as staff representatives.

1.5 Study Content

Following this introductory section,

- Part Two draws upon an extensive review of appropriate Irish and international literature to identify key issues to be addressed in mainstreaming customer service values within an organisation. Recent developments in the promotion of improved customer service delivery at central and local government levels in Ireland are also summarised to establish the policy context.
- In order to place the Irish experience within a wider international context, Part Three reviews available information on different approaches adopted in a number of different countries to the mainstreaming of customer service values in the delivery of public services.
- Part Four contains the findings from the national level case-study undertaken for the research: the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. This case-study draws upon information obtained at national, regional and local levels to trace and evaluate the significant efforts made by that Department to achieve a sharp customer focus to its work.
- Part Five contains the findings from the local government case study undertaken in Meath County Council. It provides an in-depth analysis of the dynamic approach to strategic management adopted in that authority through the progressive use of information technology (IT) to facilitate organisational change and the decentralisation of service provision.
- Finally, Part Six draws upon this detailed evaluation of national and local-level case-study evidence, as well as the review of evidence overseas, to identify key issues that need to be addressed to promote further the more extensive adoption of customer service values in Irish public service bodies.

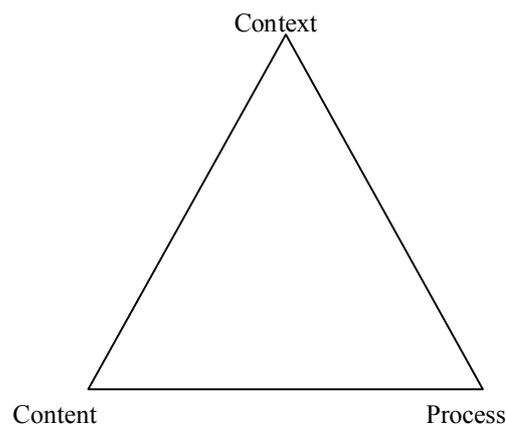
A full Bibliography is provided and detailed supporting material included in the Notes and Annexes.

Mainstreaming customer Service Values

2.1 Introduction

There are important distinctions between the commercial and non-commercial sectors with regard to the relationship between the service provider and the customer (see Humphreys 1998). These differences can be usefully summarised in the following way. 'In the private sector, there is a direct relationship between commercial success – as measured by profitability and market share – and the standard of customer service. The public sector is more complicated and in many instances distinctly different. In general, the reasons for providing a service in the first place, the nature of that service and the manner in which it is delivered, are not dictated by markets. In these circumstances, the balance between public expectations and the level of service to be provided is decided on the basis of political judgements about economic and social priorities. All that said, those who execute public service functions have a professional responsibility to do so to the highest standards of service possible, within the given level of resources, and this is what civil servants want to achieve' (Cabinet Office 1988, p.2)

Having outlined the background to, and terms of reference for, this second phase of the research, it is important to explore a number of the key themes identified from existing literature which are particularly relevant to the mainstreaming of customer service values within organisations. A useful framework for exploring this issue is Pettigrew's model of strategic change (1988), which says that such organisational change can be best considered under three headings – context, content and process (see Figure One).



Source: Pettigrew (1998)

Each of these three elements will be explored through a review of relevant literature and research. In so doing, this chapter will examine why public service organisations are undergoing change in relation to customer service (the context for change), what a customer service ethos entails (the content of change), and finally how organisations can adopt a customer service focus (the process of change). Drawing on the wide range of literature available, a conceptual framework which incorporates the context, content and process issues inherent in quality customer service will be outlined. Following the review of international experiences (Part Three), this framework can then be used for analysing the detailed insights gained from the national and local level case studies (see Parts Four and Five).

2.2 Context for Change

At the outset, it is vital to appreciate the macro-policy context for the current developments within the Irish public service at both national and local levels. At the national level, improving the quality of services provided by the Civil Service to the general public is an essential component of the Strategic Management Initiative which commenced in 1994. In particular, *Delivering Better Government* (1996) declared as a major strategic objective the achievement by the Civil Service of a significant improvement in the quality of the services delivered to its external customers. To this end, each Department/Office published a two-year Customer Service *Action Plan* in 1997/98 addressing, in a progressive manner, how it would achieve improved standards of service delivery in the areas of:

- Information
- Timeliness and Courtesy
- Consultation
- Choice
- Better Co-ordination
- Complaints
- Redress and
- Access.

In addition, each Department/Office is required to address the development of improved customer service standards in their *Strategy Statements* and annual *Business Plans*. This programme of public management reform both develops further, and places in a wider context, initiatives that had already been undertaken, in recent years, by individual Civil Service bodies. Such examples would include the Office of Revenue Commissioners' *Code of Practice* and *Charter of Rights*, the Department of Agriculture and Food's *Farmers' Charter*, as well as the wide range of customer service initiatives introduced by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (see Part Four). In this regard, it must also be noted that over 90 per cent of contacts by the general public with the Civil Service are with these three Government Departments (see Irish Marketing Surveys 1997).

However, while the first phase of this study analysed the policy context for improving customer service at national level, the very important developments at local government level were not addressed in the same detail. This is now a necessary context because of the inclusion of a detailed local authority case study in Phase Two (see Part Five). Here, it will be seen that one of the drivers for adopting a strong focus on the quality of services delivered to the public has been the significant shift in the balance of power away from local authorities.

This balance of power between local and central government has been the subject of discussion and debate across the political spectrum for many years¹.

During the mid-1990s, a series of initiatives were made which had the potential for introducing significant change in the current system of local government, with important implications for the services they deliver to the public. In July 1995, a *Government Statement on Local Government Reform* 'undertook to promote the local empowerment of people by renewing the system of local government in order to return the greatest amounts of opportunities to an effective and accountable local government system.' In its response to the *Interim Report* (1995) of the Devolution Commission established as part of this initiative, the Government stated its belief 'that effective and accountable local government is essential for the effective delivery of local public services and to enhance democratic accountability ... The Government therefore consider that the essential requirement for local government renewal is an enhancement of the role of the elected members of local authorities in setting policy for local services and giving political leadership to socio-economic development at local level' (p.29). In its *Second Report* (1997), the Devolution Commission advocated the more effective grouping of local social, economic development, environment/infrastructure and transport services under local political leadership and their integrated management, including input from the community and voluntary sectors, in order to achieve greater synergy.

In March 1996, as part of the wider SMI change programme, local authorities were asked to develop *Strategy Statements* (Corporate Plans) in the context of the new approach being adopted by Government and the *Operational Strategy* produced by the Department of Environment and Local Government. More significantly still, the publication in December 1996 of *Better Local Government* (BLG) established a major programme of reform which was underpinned by the following core principles:

1. *Enhancing local democracy* by ensuring that:

- local communities and their representatives have a real say in the delivery of the full range of public services locally,
- new forms of participation by local communities in the decision-making processes of local councils are facilitated,
- the role of councillors in running local councils is strengthened, and
- demarcations between town and county authorities are broken down.

2. *Serving the customer better* through:

- a focus on the needs of the customer,
- timely delivery of services of high quality, measured against performance indicators,
- personnel training and development in customer care,
- rigorous but streamlined operation of the various regulatory controls, and
- more openness and transparency in decision-making in local authorities.

3. *Developing efficiency* through:

- a modern and progressive financial accounting system with an increased emphasis on costing services,
- development of performance and financial indicators and value for money audit,
- development of partnership between central and local authorities, and between local authorities and other organisations, and
- effective use of information technology on a planned basis.

4. *Providing proper resources* through:

- the introduction of a source of revenue with in-built buoyancy and a measure of local discretion, and
- continuing Government support for the restoration of the non-national roads system.

In establishing the policy context for taking forward the SMI at local authority level, one or two further points need to be stressed. For example, it is important to appreciate that success in taking forward the fourfold approach advocated by BLG depends to a considerable extent on effective action on all four fronts, rather than on one key principle more than another. Thus, the improved delivery of services to the public will depend not just on those measures identified under 'serving the customer better'. Progress in this area is also dependent upon enhancing local democracy, improving efficiency and providing proper resources. On the question of customer service specifically, it must also be noted that BLG stresses, 'it is a matter for local authorities to develop their own quality initiatives in accordance with local circumstances and priorities and to set out their intentions in this regard in their SMI strategy statements – different approaches can be adopted to similar issues' (p. 42).

2.3 Content of Customer Service

A review of the literature identifies a range of different perspectives on what customer service or service quality entails³. A number of these different research approaches will be reviewed briefly because of their implications for both the content and process of customer service.

2.3.1 Expectation – Perception Approach

This approach views service delivery primarily from the viewpoint and expectations of the customer. This perspective is operationalised by Parasuraman (1995), who defines service quality as 'the degree and direction of discrepancy between customers' service perceptions and expectations' (p.145). This suggests that service quality is achieved when the customer's perceptions match or exceed their expectations of the service. Therefore, a quality customer ethos should reflect the real (not perceived) expectations and perceptions of the customers themselves. Such data can be gained through various means, e.g. surveys, customer panels, complaints procedures. As the Cabinet Office (1988) pointed out, in the private sector, customers can indicate their dissatisfaction between expectations and subsequent perceptions of service delivery by transferring their custom elsewhere. In the public sector, as McKeivitt (1998) points out, the client usually has no possibility of exit from the relationship with the service provider. This restriction places an even more compelling responsibility on service providers to install responsive and flexible delivery systems in order to give attention to 'citizen-voice'.

There are particular challenges arising from this approach in a public sector context. Unlike the private sector, a public service organisation may be constrained in the action it can take with the information received from customers. For example, while it may be possible to incorporate key customer service delivery principles relatively easily (e.g. such as extended opening hours), it may not be feasible to alter the 'product' which is delivered (e.g. the level of benefit or criteria for entitlement). As a consequence, a public service provider may have little control over the customer's perception of the inherent quality of the service provided.

In addition in the public service, 'different guiding principles, such as equitable treatment and the allocation of resources according to need pervade the processes of decision-making management and provision' (Humphreys, 1998, p. 9). As a result, customers may be necessarily disappointed by rulings on taxation issues and planning permissions made in the interest of the wider public. Ultimately, Lawton and Rose (1994) suggest that if organisations are to be more responsive, then the user of the service will have to be involved in defining what is to count as quality service. A range of mechanisms can be used to define and measure service quality, including Management Information Systems, market research and surveys, complaints and audit procedures (see Gaster, 1995).

2.3.2 Core Value Approach

As an alternative to the 'expectation-perception' approach, organisations may prefer to identify a number of core values which comprise a customer service ethos. It is possible to bring together a number of core elements of quality customer service from a range of sources (see OECD, 1996 and Gaster, 1995).

- Reliability – service dependability;
- Responsiveness – willingness to help customers;
- Assurance – courtesy, trust and confidence;
- Empathy – understanding of the customer's needs; and
- Tangibles – physical environment of the service provider.

A more detailed consideration of the term responsive service delivery is also provided by Potter (1988):

- Access – clear information on who has access, by what criteria etc.;
- Choice – in many public services, choice is absent. However Potter (1988) suggests the use of partial substitutes, e.g. publication of performance indicators to show how well service providers are providing what users want, easily available complaints systems etc.
- Information – regarding services, standards of services, citizens rights;
- Redress – appeals and complaints mechanisms;
- Representation/consultation – views of consumers should be represented to decision makers when decisions are taken concerning their interests.

With regard to the last point, Gaster (1995) stresses that if consultation processes are put in place, they must be integrated with formal decision making mechanisms, otherwise these processes will be marginalised and eventually unsupported.

2.4 Process Issues of Customer Service

Having considered some key principles of, and approaches to, quality customer service, it is necessary to identify the processes or tools which facilitate their implementation. In the context of the public service, the OECD (1996) outlines a number of quality improvement tools which can be used to enhance service delivery. These are:

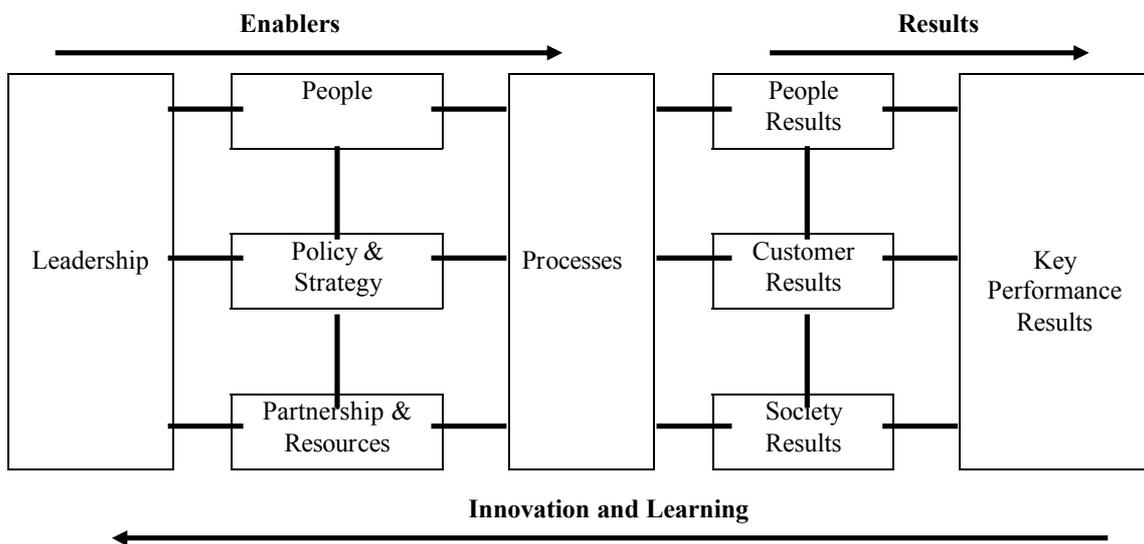
- Decentralisation of decision making⁴.
- Separation of policy-making/service delivery in support of this approach⁵.
- Business process re-engineering⁶.
- Total Quality Management (TQM).
- Small scale change projects.

More recent OECD research (1998a) argues that both the use of charters and performance measurement could be added to this list. These tools are being used to enhance service delivery in a number of countries (see Part Three). In addition to the quality improvement tools identified by the OECD, a range of comprehensive service quality improvement models have been developed to facilitate the process of developing a customer service ethos. These will now be briefly explored.

2.4.1 *European Foundation for Quality Management Model (EFQM)*

In recent years, a number of service quality models have been developed which recognise the central role of employees in delivering and achieving excellent customer service⁷. This trend may be a reflection of the growing recognition of the role of human resource management (HRM) as a vital asset for achieving quality and organisational success (see, for example, Storey, 1995 and Guest, 1987). Examples of such models include the European Foundation for Quality Management's (EFQM) Model for Business Excellence (see Figure Two).

Figure 2
The EFQM Excellence Model



The EFQM model assumes that service measures such as customer results, people results and society results, are achieved through leadership (which drives the policy and strategy), good HRM, resource and processes, leading to excellence in key performance results. While the model has primarily been adopted in the private sector, increasingly UK public sector organisations have begun to use the model (e.g. Inland Revenue Accounts Office, Cumbernauld, Scotland, and Northern Ireland Civil Service). The potential attraction of this model for the public sector organisation lies in its capacity to incorporate the needs and input of a wide range of stakeholders including customers, employees and other groups within the local or national community concerned as an integral part of the quality/excellence process.

The role of HRM policies in facilitating service quality improvement is also highlighted by Schlesinger and Heskett (1991). They suggest that rigid HRM policies which do not reward innovation or performance can lead to a 'cycle of mediocrity', which they argue is most likely to be found in large bureaucratic, state owned organisations. In such environments, service delivery standards tend to be prescribed by 'rigid rule books oriented towards standardised service' (Lovelock, 1995). Jobs tend to be 'jobs for life', tightly categorised by grade and scope of responsibilities, while salary and promotion tend to be based on seniority and performance is defined in terms of not making mistakes rather than outstanding service to customers. Lovelock (1995) also suggests that customers who find such organisations frustrating to deal with complain to staff, who become hostile or more rule-bound, thus perpetuating the cycle of mediocrity. In contrast, the use of strategic recruitment and training policies and broad job designs can lead to a cycle of success (Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991) in which there is greater empowerment of staff and employee satisfaction, which ultimately results in better customer service. In other words organisations should aim to create a virtuous rather than a vicious cycle of service, so that the needs of both the employee and the customer are met.

2.4.2 Comprehensive Model for Service Quality

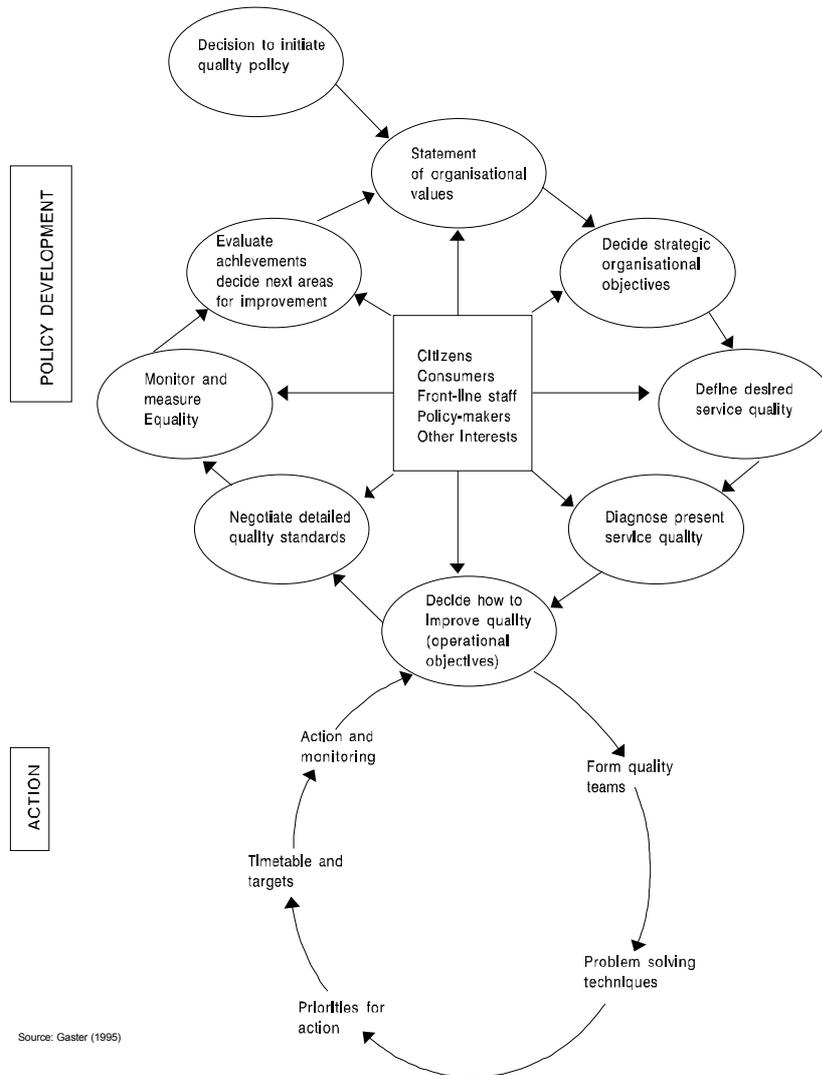
Finally, Gaster (1995) draws together a number of the foregoing approaches and components into a comprehensive model for service quality (see Figure Three). Briefly, the model involves a number of key stages in the service quality improvement process:

- identification and involvement of key interests or stakeholders
- development of explicit organisational values and objectives
- development of ideal (long-term) and attainable (medium term) service standards
- diagnosis of the organisation – to identify service gaps, strengths and weaknesses
- identification of options for action
- implementation of programme of change
- monitoring and review of changes.

This model has some noteworthy features. Firstly, it highlights how the various stakeholders (general public, policy makers, front-line staff) can be involved in the service quality process throughout the formulation, implementation and evaluation stages. Secondly, it links specifically the service quality process with corporate strategy making. It is argued that the implementation of service quality will not be effective if it is not linked to the strategic objectives and values of the organisation. Thirdly, it shows the links between the policy development and service delivery process, and the role of service quality in both processes. Fourthly, it allows for the incorporation of both the content and process elements of customer service into one model.

Having considered a range of models which can be used to mainstream a customer service ethos within an organisation the key issues involved in managing the change process implied in the development of a customer service will now be considered.

Figure 3
A Model of Service Quality



Source: Gaster (1995)

2.5 Managing the Process of Change

Gaster (1995) makes clear that if quality processes are to be implemented in a way that makes them durable, the right organisational culture must be the key. Changes to organisational structures, through decentralisation or separation of policy and delivery, and the use of service improvement models may simply not be enough to bring about enhanced service delivery. Organisations may need to pay just as much attention to the process of developing a new culture – both at central and local office levels. Organisational culture has been described as ‘a philosophy that guides an organisation’s policy towards its employees and customers’ (Pascale and Athos, 1981). The growing interest in the significance of organisational culture stemmed from what is known as the ‘excellence literature’ of the early 1980s (see, for example, Peters and Waterman, 1982, Deal and Kennedy, 1982). The central theme of the ‘excellence literature’ is that the development of strong cultures will result in improved organisational performance. Peters and Waterman (1982) identify a number of features of strong cultures, including ‘staying close to the customer’ and ‘a bias for action’.

2.5.1 Achieving a Culture of Change

In order to consider how an organisation might change its culture to become more customer focused, it is useful to briefly consider what organisational culture comprises. Schein (1985) suggests that there are three levels of organisational culture:

- artefacts – physical layout, dress code, symbols, logo, rules, systems
- beliefs, values and attitudes – moral or ethical codes of conduct
- basic assumptions – which guide employees perceptions and behaviour – i.e. the way things are done.

He argues that while it is relatively easy to change the artefacts of a company, it is less easy to change the values and underlying assumptions. The implications in terms of customer service are that while customer service artefacts can be introduced (e.g. physical layout of offices, logos, leaflets), the employee’s attitudes and behaviours towards the customer may be less easy to change. Similarly, Lawton and Rose (1994) point out that one of the key problems in the implementation of a quality service initiative is that ‘the required cultural change may not extend to those at a street level in the organisation – those who deal with the public on a day to day basis’ (p.191) and are therefore crucial to the projection of a quality image.

How then can an organisation develop a customer service culture which is reflected in the values and behaviours of most if not all of its members? A range of models has been developed as a means of understanding and managing the process of changing organisational culture (see Lewin, 1951, Burke 1992, Beer et al 1990). A central element of these models is the role of employees in the process of change, which is particularly significant in the context of quality customer service, since employees play such a key role in the delivery of services.

A simple but useful model developed by Lewin (1951) illustrates the key stages involved in any process of cultural change:

- Unfreezing: creating an awareness of the need for change in the organisation; creating a state of anxiety such that members are no longer happy with the current situation and they desire change;
- Changing: moving the organisation to its desired new state through use of intervention, such as changes to organisational structure, strategic planning, and teambuilding;
- Refreezing: creating a permanent change in the behaviour of organisational members in line with the new values or culture and making new behaviour relatively secure against change, for example through the use of supporting HRM policies.

2.5.2 *Change Inhibitors*

Lewin (1951) also suggests that the change process is made more difficult by the fact that while there may be driving forces for change, there will also be restraining forces which hinder the process of organisational change. For example, in the context of developing a customer service ethos in the public service, driving forces may include external pressure from customers, the *Strategic Management Initiative*, political pressure for change. In contrast, restraining forces might include internal resistance, rigidities of work practices and the lack of a compelling need to change. Lewin suggests that if organisations wish to implement lasting change, they must either increase the driving forces for change, or reduce or turn around the restraining forces. For example, internal resistance could be addressed by identifying employee concerns, through the use of an attitude survey, and by dealing with such concerns through participative change mechanisms, like quality circles, workgroups or teambuilding.

Models however often portray a simplistic picture of the change process. Organisational change is both complex and fraught with difficulties. It is suggested by some commentators that most change programmes actually fail to produce change (Beer et al, 1990). This is felt to be especially so if they are initiated in a top down manner. In addition, it is commonly believed that in the absence of a dramatic crisis, and a clear perception of the need for change, it is very difficult to change the culture of an organisation (see Browne, 1995). The lack of a compelling need for change is often referred to as a key concern in the context of public sector change programmes. Finally, resistance to change by employees is a natural phenomenon, particularly where the existing culture of the organisation is strong, as employees may persist in holding on to the 'old way of doing things' (see Brown, 1995).

Notwithstanding the key challenges which arise in the process of implementing cultural change, particularly in the public sector, a number of lessons can be drawn together from the literature which may assist the change process, and these will now be briefly considered.

2.5.3 *Approaches to Change*

It is suggested that given the risks involved in implementing a wide scale top down service quality initiative programme of change, it is recommended that organisations implement pilot change programmes as a means of gaining support for change (Gaster, 1995, Beer et al, 1990). Beer et al (1990) point out that just because a company issues a statement about a new initiative, such as customer service, does not mean that its employees necessarily know what roles to take on to achieve the desired changes. They suggest that telling people what new behaviour is expected of them will not result in change. Employees must be actively involved in the change process, and assigned new roles which effectively 'force' new behaviours and values in line with the desired change. By focusing on bottom up initiatives, it is argued that revitalisation can be spread through departments as opposed to being pushed down from the top. Within the Irish context, Partnership Committees could have a potentially positive role to play here.

It is also suggested that a key factor in the success of a quality initiative change programme is the involvement of front-line staff, since they are often in the best position to ascertain the needs of the customer (see Figure Three). Gaster's model (1995) provides a framework within which employees can be involved at all stages of the quality cycle. Gaster also introduces the importance of the concept of internal customer service as a means of enhancing external customer service. In other words, poor internal customer service can translate into negative front-line employee behaviour, while good internal customer service, aided by good internal communications, has the opposite effect.

The role of HRM policies as a means of empowering and encouraging employees to become more customer-oriented has also been highlighted (see EFQM, 1998, Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991, Gaster, 1995). In particular, training and development policies can be employed to promote cultural change particularly in the context of promoting customer service (Gaster, 1995, Brown, 1995). In a similar vein, Lawton and Rose (1994) suggest that if public sector organisations are to become more service-oriented, they need to develop learning capabilities and remove barriers to learning which may include systems which tend to punish failure, poor flows of information and defensive cultures.

2.6 Role of New Technology

The increasing emphasis on quality customer service in the public sector has been fuelled by the emergence of what is called the New Public Management (NPM) (Farnham and Horton, 1996), in contrast to the traditional school of thought regarding public administration. One of the key trends associated with the emergence of NPM is new technology and it is argued that information and communication technologies have particular significance for the enhanced management and delivery of public services (see Bellamy, 1996)⁹. For example, Bellamy points out that through the use of electronic networks, 'street level' staff can access customer records from a flexible range of locations which in turn offers the customer greater choice about how and where to make contact with public services. This is best utilised in the 'one stop shop' concept where the customer can, for example, have all his/her social security needs dealt with in one office. Bellamy also suggests that electronic networks can facilitate greater self-service, whereby the customer can carry out transactions in 'real time', for example through the Internet. Finally, Bellamy notes an increasing trend in the UK public sector of business process re-engineering (e.g. rationalising and remodelling service delivery processes) rather than overlaying technology on existing service delivery processes.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

The foregoing review identifies a range of differing techniques and models for implementing quality customer service. It highlights the fact that there may be no 'one best approach' to this process. As Lawton and Rose point out 'there cannot be one formula for quality – each organisation has to develop its own approach' (1994 p.188). The model developed by Gaster (1995) appears most useful since it provides a suggested process by which quality customer service can be integrated with the strategic planning process, to ensure that it gains a mainstream focus in the organisation (see Figure Three). Since resistance is a natural phenomenon in any change process, the model offers a way forward. It involves the various stakeholders (e.g. customers, employees) in the complete quality process from the policy formulation to service delivery stage. This involvement provides the potential to both minimise resistance and ensure that the quality standards and values which are incorporated into the strategic planning process will meet the needs of internal and external customers. Finally, the role of IT, while not specifically considered in the model appears to be gaining significance as a key lever of change in the development of quality services.

Review of International Trends

3.1 Introduction

Having established a broad conceptual framework for, and identified the key issues to be addressed in, mainstreaming a quality customer service ethos in a public service organisation, it is also valuable to establish the wider international context for such initiatives. A review of the international trends enables an assessment to be made of how Ireland stands in comparison to the reform programmes in other OECD countries. It will also help establish a benchmark on Ireland's place internationally in the quality of the services provided by its public service.

3.2 Approaches Adopted in other Countries

The main issues explored at a recent OECD forum (1998) reflect a growing interest by member countries in the nature and extent of the service provider-user relationship in the context of service delivery. Among the key issues discussed at the forum were:

- What are the real expectations of the citizen with regard to service delivery: active participation and/or information?
- How could relations be improved between government/ groups?
- What are the outcomes of recent management innovations such as citizens charters, decentralisation?
- What are the limits of citizen participation and government responsiveness and how can they be addressed?

A review of recent trends in OECD member states highlights a continuum of approaches to engaging with the citizen-client as a means of improving service delivery. It also highlights a range of different mechanisms which are being used as a means of achieving responsive and quality services. These two issues will now be briefly explored, drawing both on the content issues of responsive and quality service, as well as the process issues or service quality improvement tools, discussed in Part Two. In addition, references to the role of employees in service delivery will be explored where appropriate.

3.2.1 New Zealand

The twin driving forces behind public service reform in New Zealand were the economic crisis in the early 1980s, and the subsequent election of the Labour Government in 1984 which actively pursued a programme of financial, legislative and administrative reform. A key objective was to 'emulate a commercial management environment in the provision of services, where appropriate to do so with cost effectiveness and competition as the driving force' (Kouzmin *et al*, 1990, p.86). This was achieved through deregulation, privatisation and economic restructuring. From a service delivery perspective, this involved the following changes:

- separation of commercial from non-commercial activities and a subsequent and significant privatisation of state owned enterprises;
- restructuring of relationships based on an agency approach. Newly appointed chief executives of agencies are appointed on contracts, with performance expectations laid out in written agreement with the Minister concerned.

- Decentralisation of decision making and control from central departments (e.g. State Services Commission) to the Chief Executive of each agency; thus giving Chief Executives autonomy in relation to recruitment, pay, rewards, financial management; and also allowing for delegation of authority to managers to the 'lowest level of competence' (Boston, 1987 p.434).
- Clear separation of policy and service delivery in the remaining government departments. Holmes and Wileman (1995), who carried out a review of New Zealand reforms, have criticised them in certain regards – i.e. over separation of policy and service delivery which results in disruption of essential feedback between policy makers and policy implementers.

Clearly, the reforms have focused on financial and structural changes with little explicit referral to the importance of quality service delivery per se. However, it could be argued that public sector reforms have resulted in considerable direct/indirect benefits to the customer i.e. reduction in public service operating costs. In view of the significant reduction in public sector numbers, and the changed nature of personnel policies (recruitment, rewards), it is not perhaps surprising that from the perspective of employees the changes have been described as 'intensive, pervasive, and for some at least very painful' (McNamara, 1995 p.58).

3.2.2 *United States of America (USA)*

Service delivery reforms in the USA have been greatly influenced by changing management thought, most notably the contributions of Osborne and Gebler (1992)¹⁰. They argue that by focusing on the customer, government will ensure that the needs of the public and not the bureaucracy are met. Consequently, in the first phase of the *Reinventing Government* initiative, an Executive Order entitled 'Setting Customer Service Standards' (Clinton, 1995) called for a fundamental change in the way the Federal Government carried out its business in order to become more customer driven.

The first phase of the initiative sought to establish what people have a right to when they ask for a particular service. In the second phase of *Reinventing Government*, this effort is to be continued and integrated with other restructuring activities. In addition to enhancing service delivery, there is a requirement for agencies to evaluate their programmes and functions to establish whether they are critical to their mission based on customer input. Customer service standards must also be related to legislative activities, including strategic planning and performance measurement. In the US reform process, there is also a strong emphasis on the role of employees in delivering enhanced service since it is argued that, 'without satisfied employees, we cannot have satisfied customers' (Clinton, 1995). Consequently, there is a key emphasis on the need to survey employees and to take action to motivate and recognise employees for meeting or exceeding customer service standards. This mirrors the focus of service delivery outlined by Schlesinger and Heskett (1991) and the EFQM 2000 model discussed in Part Two.

In order to give effect to a more customer driven public service, the following standards were implemented by Executive Order on the authority of the US President:

- identify the customers who are or should be served by the agency;
- survey customers to determine the kind and quality of services they want and their level of satisfaction with existing services;
- post service standards and measure results against them;
- benchmark customer service performance against the best in business;
- survey front-line employees on barriers to, and ideas for, matching the best in business;

- provide customers with choices in both the sources of service and the means of delivery;
- make information, services and complaints systems easily accessible;
- provide means to address customer complaints.

Agencies are also required to report on customer service surveys and to publish a customer plan. An initiative entitled *Conversations with America* has also been launched to engage customers further with the service delivery process. Agencies are required to create activities and programmes that will engage customers in a discussion about how to improve government service by determining the kind and quality of services they want and their level of satisfaction with existing services. Each agency is required to designate a liaison officer to co-ordinate information and programs dealing with the *Conversations with America* initiative. In turn agencies liaise with the *National Partnership for Reinventing Government*. The use of all forms of media is encouraged as a means of engaging the customer in consultation. Agencies have also been encouraged to develop new processes to deal with customer complaints e.g. holding problem-solving days with customers. Agencies are expected to track and analyse the data they receive from customers and to use this data to change processes that do not serve customers well. IT has also played a role in enhancing customer service in the US. A project entitled *Re-engineering Government through IT* was designed to reduce the amount of information collected from citizens and to rationalise internal bureaucratic processes through a greater sharing of data among agencies (Bellamy, 1996).

3.2.3 United Kingdom (UK)

In the UK, a Government was elected in 1979 that was firmly committed to ‘rolling back the frontiers of the state’ (Lawton and Rose, 1994, p.6). ‘Pressures on public spending led to a need to raise quality without increasing expenditure’ (Kuuttiniemi & Virtanen, 1998p. 38). The privatisation programme of the 1980s greatly reduced the role of the State as direct service provider in major areas, such as gas, water and electricity. Many more services were contracted out to private suppliers under the Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) Programme. At the same time, many departments and agencies initiated quality service delivery programmes.

In 1991, the UK government set out their proposals for a Citizens Charter in a White Paper (see Humphreys 1998). The Charter programme aims to improve public service quality has a 10 year time-frame. It has been said to have represented ‘the most systematic attempt to date to make explicit what users of services can expect from them’ (see Lawton and Rose, 1994, p.168). Based on four themes – quality, choice, standards and value – the Charter introduced a set of ‘principles of public service’. The current principles of public service delivery are outlined as:

- Set standards of service;
- Be open and provide full information;
- Consult and involve;
- Encourage access and the promotion of choice;
- Treat all fairly;
- Put things right when they go wrong;
- Use resources effectively;
- Innovate and improve and work with other providers.

The aims of raising standards and improving responsiveness are measured and reported in detail to Parliament on a yearly basis. Improvements are measured in relation to the key principles of setting standards, information and openness, choice and consultation, courtesy and helpfulness, putting things right and value for money. It has been described as 'an umbrella for many of the reforms of the public service' within the UK (Lawton and Rose, 1994, p.169). Subsequent to the launch of the Charter initiative, a number of service-related Charters have been published in the UK, including the Council Tenants Charter, the Jobseekers Charter and the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency Charter. The Government awards Charter Marks to organisations that meet Charter standards. A Citizen's Charter complaints task force was set up in 1993 to undertake a wide-ranging review of the public service complaints system so as to ensure that the systems are in accordance with the Charter principles.

The *Service First Unit* in the Cabinet Office issues guidelines on how to produce Charters and encourages all service providers to consult with the users in drawing up the charters, including compensation policy. It commissioned outside consultants to set up a People's Panel of 5,000 members randomly selected across the country. The Panel members are consulted on ways of delivering public services and improving the delivery from the viewpoint of the user, and the results are published. The Panel 'makes possible the tracking of attitudes and opinions over time, the search for the reasons for change and research into the views of users and non-users alike' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998, p.42).

As the analysis in Part Two indicates, a successful approach to improving service quality also requires significant attention in the HR area (see also Humphreys and Worth-Butler 1999). The *Investors in People* (IIP) initiative was a response to the UK's need to maintain and increase its competitive position in world markets by increasing its commitment to developing a more highly skilled and flexible workforce. It has been described as a key element of the 'standards movement' which grew from the need to establish nationally- recognised criteria to underpin quality of work at every level. The initiative was launched in 1991, created out of the collaborative work of the National Training Task Force, the Campaign for British Industry (CBI), Department of Employment, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Institute for Personnel Development (IPD). IIP has been a private company since 1993. The focus of Investors in People is on ensuring that training is strategic and linked to the organisation's business needs. By 1995, 2,000 UK firms has received the IIP standard¹¹.

3.2.4 Australia

In contrast to New Zealand, public sector reforms in Australia have focused on achieving a more efficient, effective and responsive public service, rather than being a re-examination of the fundamental role of government (see McNamara, 1995, p.59). The most recent reforms have focused increasingly on the employment framework of the Australian Public Service (APS). A series of reforms were outlined in the *Public Service Management Bill*, 1997, which has not yet been enacted. However, a number of administrative reforms have been introduced since early 1998 in order to enhance the delivery of public services. Most notably, in September 1997, the Prime Minister launched Centrelink, a 'one-stop-shop' integrating customer access to government services previously provided across a number of portfolios (see Humphreys 1998). It has been described as 'probably the biggest single reform undertaken in the area of service delivery during the past 50 years'. The establishment of Centrelink clearly separated policy from service delivery. The aim was to improve customer service, enable quicker decision making and enhance value for money through service linkages. Centrelink delivers payments and services for five Commonwealth Departments, ranging from income support to employment services. Although Centrelink is a statutory authority reporting to the Minister for Social Security, it is not part of the Department, and its operating funds are derived from the Commonwealth Departments who purchase its services. In the first year of operation, there was a 23% reduction in customer complaints for the agencies concerned compared to the previous year. Centrelink also returned savings to government of AS\$97 million in the first two years, with an estimated AS\$11.5 million each year thereafter of operation.

The bulk of Centrelink's client base lies with the Departments of Social Security Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. One of its key high level goals is to increase customer and community involvement and satisfaction with services. Key strategies to achieve this goal include:

- to develop a customer service culture;
- to understand customer and community expectations;
- greater involvement of the community into determining service needs;
- to redesign services to better meet customer needs, and to deliver one stop shop capability using every appropriate means of service style and information technology;
- measurement of customer satisfaction; and
- to maintain customer confidence in confidentiality and privacy arrangements.

A number of specific service quality improvement tools used by Centrelink are worth considering in some detail:

1. Creation of the Centrelink Customer Charter

The Charter was developed following extensive consultation with customers, community groups, the Commonwealth Ombudsman and customer service staff. The former Commonwealth Ombudsman recently pointed out that while charters are a useful starting point in enhancing service quality, the real challenge lies in 'teasing out the detail in a range of situations' (Centrelink, 1997). The Charter was reviewed after six months with client departments, staff and customers and community groups. The review indicated that the content of the charter was still relevant and some minor wording changes were made. Bi-annual customer satisfaction research is carried out to measure performance against the commitments made in the Charter.

2. Value Creation Workshops

Workshops are held between staff and customers which are aimed at discovering customer expectations and needs to bring about service improvements. Between September 1997 and June 1998, 6,710 customers and 9,480 staff participated in 511 workshops across the country. Centrelink trained accredited facilitators to guide the workshops. Insights from the workshops included ranking features which customers value or dislike in customer service. These are compared statistically with staff's expectations regarding customer likes/dislikes. This approach mirrors the focus evident in the literature, in which quality service is increasingly being measured by the difference between customer expectations and perceptions. Staff take customer views regarding service delivery from these workshops and prepare action plans for improved customer service.

3. Measurement/Evaluation

Each Centrelink Customer Service Centre is assessed twice yearly against the commitment contained in the Charter. Centrelink recently adopted the balanced scorecard approach as a means of measuring service performance.

4. Redress

A comprehensive customer feedback and complaints mechanism is in place. Centrelink also established a Customer Relations and Compensation Group to handle more difficult cases of service breakdown. During 1997/98, 15 customers were awarded compensation on foot of claims to this Group.

5. Employee Involvement

Five hundred staff across the organisation have been trained as 'customer service champions' and they are working to connect staff to the strategic directions/development of a customer service culture. There is also a key emphasis in Centrelink on the use of innovative HRM practices, and Centrelink has taken a lead role in a number of Australian public service wide HRM initiatives¹².

3.2.5 Finland

In the past few years, PUMA has emphasised in its publications the importance of evaluation to public management reforms. 'Evaluation is important for the successful implementation and for the sustainability of reforms' (see Holkeri and Summa, 1996, p.1). In Finland, discussions about the importance of evaluation to the proper development and implementation of reform policies were underway in the 1990s¹³. The Kanske project (an international comparison of public administration developments), was carried out by the Ministry of Finance in 1992/93 and its final report suggested that the Ministry of Finance should evaluate the reform policies that had been carried out in Finland since the mid 1980s.

Major public sector reforms were carried out in Finland during the years 1987 to 1995, which resulted in substantial changes in financial management, personnel management and the structure of the state sector. The impetus for evaluation of reform in Finland was 'the need for a basis for better informed policy choices. Reform policies are often a multi-faceted combination of overall policy decisions, individual reform projects and detailed changes in regulations. This is particularly true in the Finnish case' (Holkeri and Summa, 1996, p.5). The evaluation criteria are as follows:

- the effects of the reforms from the citizens' point of view i.e. views on the level and quality of public service;
- the governability of the public sector from the point of view of political decision makers, including its adaptability to changing conditions;

- the efficiency and effectiveness of the functions of public bodies and the public sector as a whole; and
- the working atmosphere, quality of leadership and motivation of staff in government organisations.

The evaluation programme consisted of twelve complementary studies covering the major reforms and a steering group was set up in December 1995 to plan and co-ordinate the programme. All of these organisations have been involved in the planning and implementation of the reforms and/or are potential users of the results of the evaluation. 'The most important use of the results of the programme will be to identify further initiatives for moving towards a 'government that works better and costs less' (Holkeri and Summa, 1996, p.16)¹⁴. One very important outcome of this evaluation of past reforms has been a renewed emphasis on the quality of public services delivered to the citizen.

A core method of improving the quality of public services favoured by the Finnish government is the use of Service Charters and a Charter approach was introduced into public policy in 1997. The impetus for the introduction of service charters is the need for cost savings in the public sector as 'bad – quality services tend to be more expensive than high-quality services.' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998, p. 47). The key ideas underpinning Service Charters are summarised by Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen (1998, p.17) as:

1. Promises to the service users to produce quality.
2. Flexible and customer-centred approach to service provision.
3. Customer feedback and the correction of errors.
4. Description of the service in a service specification.
5. Producing the best possible service efficiently.

Charters provide an opportunity to both influence the operation of service units and a means of incorporating result-oriented management and quality improvement in the organisation. The compensation mechanisms in the Citizen's Charter model are an obvious indicator of the quality of the produced service. Compensation mechanisms have been included in Service Charters by several City departments in Finland and compensation varies from financial compensation to discounts being granted if a service is not provided within the timeframe as promised. The citizen today is seen as a 'voter and a tax-payer as well as a consumer and customer of public services who wants full value for his or her money. After all, the purpose of public services and the justification of their existence is to serve the customer and society' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998, p. 13).

In April 1998 the Finnish government published the *Resolution on High-Quality Services, Good Governance and a Responsible Civic Society*. This Resolution sets out guidelines for administrative policy and ensures equal distribution and provision of basic social welfare services throughout the country by increasing the number of alternative ways to produce services, e.g. through the use of IT. 'The principles of good governance form a firm foundation when ensuring higher-quality services for the citizens as customers of public services and as taxpayers. In addition to the availability of the services, their quality as well as customer-orientation and freedom of choice will be emphasised.' The Resolution aims 'to permit citizens and enterprises to attend to license, application, notification, and inspection matters from their homes, offices or common service points instead of having to personally visit an authority' (see Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998, p.49).

3.3 Concluding Remarks

A review of experiences in a range of other countries indicates the value placed in constructive engagement with the public and the increasing popularity of a charter approach to raising customer service standards. Quality has become an immensely popular concept where organisation of public services is concerned (see Pollit and Bouckaert, 1995). Indeed Coote (1998b) proposes 'a democratic approach to quality which would encapsulate the themes of openness, customer rights, public participation in decision making, and true choice of quality' (p.218). Such a strategy involves responsive public service delivery by 'motivating the workforce in public services and changing management and professional cultures' (Kuuttiniemi and Virtanen, 1998, p.7). Through an analysis of the approaches adopted in other countries, it has been possible to establish the key issues to be addressed in adopting a customer-centred approach to the delivery of public services. With this information in mind, as well as the conceptual framework discussed in Part Two, it is now appropriate to analyse in detail the experiences of two very different organisations in responding to these challenges within the Irish public service.

Case Study

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA)

4.1 Introduction

A recent statement by the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, sets out clearly the primary focus on customer service issues that is characterised by his Department: 'Improved Customer Service in its broadest sense is what we are continually striving for, and I believe that this Department is well placed to do this in the challenging years ahead' (DSCFA, 1998). That statement is also a recognition of the importance placed upon the continuous development of a customer service ethos in the Department chosen as the national case study. A measure of the Department's success in mainstreaming a customer service is similarly reflected in consistently high customer satisfaction levels with the services provided by the Department (see MRBI 1996).

Founded in 1947, as the Department of Social Welfare¹⁵, the Department's mission is to promote social well-being through income and other supports which enable people to participate in society in a positive way. A brief profile of its expenditure and workload indicates the nature and extent of its activities. For example, payments are made to circa 800,000 customers each week. On an annual basis, circa 1.5 million claim transactions and over 300,000 reviews are carried out. The DSCFA's total expenditure in 1996 was £4,377 billion.

Since 1986, the Department's activities have been separated into policy making and service delivery activities. The role of the policy area, which is known as the Aireacht, is to develop Social Welfare Services (SWS) and to assist the Minister in policy formulation and budgetary matters. The role of the service delivery area is to deliver and manage social, community and family welfare schemes through a network of regional, local and decentralised offices. There are also a number of agencies which act under the statutory aegis of DSCFA¹⁶.

Given the complexity and size of the Department, it was not feasible, to trace and assess every aspect of the development of customer service in the Department since the 1980s. To do so would have been outside the scope of resources available to the study. However, a number of key changes which have taken place are considered, under the broad headings of organisational restructuring; the role of information technology (IT); corporate planning and other key issues. This information was obtained from a comprehensive review of available documentary material and in-depth interviews with senior management and other key informants at national, regional and local levels. Each of the broad headings will now be discussed in turn.

4.2 Organisational Restructuring

Until the early 1980s, the Department is said to have 'exhibited all the classical attributes of a civil service structure - hierarchical, highly centralised, inability to change....' (McCumiskey, 1992). From the mid 1980s onwards, a number of significant changes were made to the organisational structure in order to enhance the delivery and quality of the Department's services. These structural changes were prompted by a range of external factors. These factors included:

- pressure to respond positively to budgetary constraints imposed by the need to introduce tight public expenditure controls;
- a growing concern, within the country, at the seemingly inexorable increase in social welfare expenditure;

- staff had to manage increasing claim loads, as well as coping with unsatisfactory levels of service provision, as manifested in delays in service delivery and increasing customer complaints (see McCumiskey, 1992).

Such a situation reflected many of the common pressures for change experienced among other advanced economies (see OECD, 1996). In addition to these pressures, there was a growing recognition internally, at senior management level, that change was necessary if the Department was to meet its responsibilities to its stakeholders: i.e. customers, politicians and ultimately the taxpayer.

In 1986, the Department was restructured in accordance with the Aireacht/Executive agency framework which had been recommended in an earlier review of the Civil Service (see PSORG, 1969). The effect of this was to separate the policy making and service delivery functions of the Department to facilitate both improved policy formulation and greater autonomy and clarity of focus on operational issues (see O'Shea, 1996). In tandem with this development, an extensive localisation of the Department's services commenced in the late 1980's following an agreement with the Unions called '*the Local Office of the Future*'. The aim of the localisation strategy was to deliver services closer to the customer. A profile of the services provided in one region illustrates the changes this has brought about. In the 1980s, there were four large Employment Exchanges in the Dublin region, all of which were located in the city centre. Today, in the same region, there are 18 local offices situated in a number of suburban areas. In tandem with this localisation project, a comprehensive programme of refurbishment of local offices was undertaken.

In addition, the Department has undertaken a significant programme of operational decentralisation since the 1980s. This was part of the wider Government programme to relocate units of central government away from Dublin (see Joyce et al., 1988). For example, the Department's Pension Schemes and services were decentralised to a newly established Pension Services Office (PSO) in Sligo. Decentralisation of Family/Employment Supports and Child and Treatment Benefit Schemes took place to Longford and Letterkenny respectively.

Further organisational restructuring took place in 1991 with the establishment of a new regional management structure. The aim of so doing was to facilitate the development of a more easily managed, better co-ordinated and responsive service at local level and, in this regard, 'the boundaries of each region, in as far as possible, were defined to coincide with regions covered by other state services, thus allowing for closer liaison with regional managers of other statutory agencies' (DSCFA 1997).

The new regional structure comprises Area Managers and Regional Management Teams reporting through a Regional Manager to the Regional Director, who has responsibility for the overall management of the regions. In tandem with the regional structure, the 'control function' of the Department, which was carried out by an outdoor Inspection Branch, was integrated into the regional management structure¹⁷. The regional management structure can be seen to have enhanced service delivery in a number of respects. Firstly, it has in a sense 'forced' a wider perception of the customer base at local level. For example, prior to the implementation of this structure, the customer base of the local office was almost exclusively the unemployed. Since regionalisation, other customer groups such as pensioners can be targeted within a particular region. Thus, panels of pensioners and lone parents have been set up in a number of regions, a mechanism which would not have been possible prior to regionalisation. In addition, other segments of the customer base, such as pensioners can now have many of their needs met within the local office. Secondly, regionalisation has enabled the Department to build better relationships with other agencies, in turn facilitating the broadening and deepening of its remit. A good example of this approach is the development of employment support schemes with FAS¹⁸ through targeting high areas of unemployment.

4.3 Role of Information Technology

Information technology has played a significant role both in facilitating and driving forward changes in service delivery in the Department. The most notable initiative in this regard was the project to Integrate Short Term Schemes (ISTS)¹⁹. The primary purpose of this project was to facilitate the development of a 'one-stop shop' concept in SWS, whereby one point of delivery would provide a range of services which had previously been functionally separate. The ISTS project involved the integration of the various short term scheme computer systems to enable staff in local offices to process all stages of a customer's claim for a range of different schemes, thus catering for all aspects of the customer's service needs.

The ISTS has recently been expanded to cater for the processing of Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) Claims, which are within the remit of the Health Boards. As a result of this expansion, Community Welfare Officers in the Health Boards can now record customer details directly through the ISTS, thus speeding up processing times, and enabling better integration in service delivery between the Health Boards and the DSCFA. Plans are also underway to carry out a similar project for the Department's long term schemes. As part of this initiative, a business process re-engineering project has taken place in order to assess critically the current way in which their delivery is structured and processed. An outcome of this project has been restructuring within the Pension Services office based around a 'teams for schemes' approach which allows staff to look at and to end processes instead of on a function by function basis.

Other elements of customer service, including choice and information have also been greatly enhanced by information technology. For example in the 1980s, all unemployed persons had to 'sign on' and collect benefits in the local office on a weekly basis. Subsequent developments in IT have enabled the Department to contract out the payment of benefits to Post Offices. This has had a number of benefits.

- It has enabled a relaxing of signing-on procedures, since customers do not have to call to the local Office each week. This in turn has reduced queuing and delays in local offices;
- It has minimised security risk for staff working in local offices;
- The use of Electronic Fund Transfer (EFT) banking has also been introduced across the majority of schemes, whereby the customer can withdraw benefits through banking facilities. At present 90% of Back to Work Scheme participants are paid in this way, 32% of those on maternity claims and 18% of those on Old Age Contributory Pensions.

It does, however, mean that the Department has less direct control of customer service standards when the delivery of important areas of its work are outsourced in this way.

The Department intends to use IT further to enhance service delivery and quality in the context of its strategic goals. For example, the Department is currently working towards the development of a new service delivery model, and there is a clear recognition that the development and implementation of this model will be greatly facilitated by IT, for example in the development of LO-CALL facilities²⁰. The Department is also considering ways in which technology can enhance the quality and delivery of both services and information in the context of the development of 'the Information Society' and in response to citizens' demands for better services. For example, while the Department's services are displayed on teletext, significant development of the Department's website has also recently taken place. The Department has also made use of kiosk based information systems on a pilot basis to establish the usefulness for customers of keying in details to establish their eligibility for a particular scheme. It has also become involved in a pilot project to test the feasibility of a 'cashless society' in Ennis, as part of the Information Age Town project. Customers in this area use 'swipe cards' to pay for goods and services and to withdraw benefits. The advantages of such an approach include greater range of choice for the customer in terms of access to service, payment methods, and greater confidentiality.

In the context of IT and service delivery, a project known as Reach21 is currently underway. The aim of Reach is to achieve improved customer service delivery through a greater integration of social services delivered by different departments and agencies, aided by information technology. A key feature of this project is a proposal to develop a Public Services Card which will act as a common gateway to government services. The key intention of this initiative is that information which is sent to one government agency will be shared between agencies in a central database, thus minimising duplication and delays for the customer. The Department is also currently considering other means by which IT can be used to enhance service delivery, for example through a greater use of the internet and other informational sources.

4.4 Corporate Planning

In common with all Civil Service Departments/Offices, the DSCFA has been involved in a formal strategic planning process since the launch of the SMI in 1994. In 1998, the Department launched its *Statement of Strategy* for the period 1998 to 2001²² following an extensive consultation exercise with managers and staff. This Statement sets out the Department's high level goals and values which will shape its dealings both externally in terms of the customer, and internally in terms of inter-staff relationships²³. The Department's values, in its dealings with customers recognise:

- Self-reliance
- Partnership
- Shared Responsibility
- Value for Money
- Consultation and Redress
- Confidentiality
- Openness

The *Strategy Statement* also sets out a 'Strategic Framework' which identifies the means by which the Department will achieve its high level goals. The 'Strategic Framework' is the product of three Working Groups comprising staff from across the Department, which were set up to identify and resolve key strategic issues. The 'Wider Remit Group' primarily examined policy development issues. The 'Service Delivery Group' reviewed and made strategic proposals in relation to service delivery and customer service, and outlined principles that should guide the development of the new service delivery model. Finally, the 'Framework for Change' Group identified the 'people issues' which were required to be addressed to enable the Department to implement its strategic policy and service delivery objectives.

The *Strategy Statement* also identifies a number of Critical Success Factors (CSFs) necessary for the implementation of the Strategy. Some of these CSFs are particularly noteworthy in the context of customer service. For example, it is recognised that it is vital for the effective operation of business processes that there is a clear understanding of the role to be played by all in the 'service delivery chain' and the importance of good internal customer service is recognised (see Part Two). From a customer service perspective, the *Strategy Statement* also outlines proposals for the development of a new service delivery model. The aim of the new model is to balance the key issues of continuous improvement in service delivery and the need to control abuse of the system. The central principle underpinning the new model is to reorganise and integrate services *around the customer* by changing processes, structures and support systems to take account of best practice in relation to customer service delivery. Key elements of the new model include enhanced access to services, the local office network, differentiated response and payment strategies. These are outlined in considerable detail in the Statement. However a number of these principles are worthy of discussion here.

The concept of a 'differentiated response' is a recognition that different sub-groups of customers have differing needs, depending on their circumstances and the service being provided. For example, if the customer is a contributory pensioner or a Child Benefit recipient, their need for direct contact with the Department will be far less than for an unemployed person or lone parent. This has implications for the method of service delivery required. Thus, the focus for the 'lower maintenance' client could be on providing cheap and convenient access to the telephone (e.g. LO-CALL facilities). In contrast, the high maintenance client needs more direct contact with the local office. In recognition of the needs of such customers, the Department has already broadened its remit, in conjunction with other agencies such as FÁS, towards the provision of *employment supports* in addition to its traditional role of providing *unemployment relief*. For example, jobs facilitators are attached to a number of local offices, and their function is to facilitate unemployed people in seeking new employment. The provision of high maintenance customer care is being developed in a number of local office *case management* pilot project. Case management involves taking a more 'holistic' view of the customer's needs. Instead of simply focusing on paying the customer, case management involves identifying other sources of support, such as assistance from other agencies and opportunities for employment or training.

In order to translate its corporate strategy into action, the Department also recently produced detailed Business Plans for each of its sections. In terms of measuring service standards, the Department outlined performance indicators under three broad headings in its recent Business Plans, by which service delivery performance would be measured in the year 1998. These headings are:

- Customer Service
- Control
- Process Times

A number of key themes evident from the Strategy Statement are worth highlighting. Firstly, there is clear recognition at senior management level within the Department that customer service is not simply an additional layer – it must be embedded in the organisation's culture and processes. This is evident from a perusal of their Business Plans, which highlight that customer service is an integral part of each facet of the Department's business. This point is even more clearly illustrated when one examines the Department's *Customer Action Plan*, which was recently developed under the ongoing programme *Delivering Better Government* (see Part Two). From the qualitative research undertaken, there is a clear impression that customer service is already well integrated with the business planning process, suggesting that the Customer Action Plan represents relatively little that is new in terms of activities that the Department has already undertaken.

A second key theme is the clear recognition of the role of staff in delivering and achieving the Department's objectives. In the context of customer service, this role is very clearly acknowledged by the Secretary General in the Strategy Statement: 'Our reputation for a strong customer service culture is a tribute to the commitment and dedication of our staff who provide an excellent service, often in difficult and demanding circumstances' (DSCFA 1998 p.3). In recognition of the key role played by staff in the delivery of customer service, the Department outlines a number of mechanisms to maximise the potential and abilities of staff in service delivery including; the use of employee attitude surveys, the use of innovative approaches to learning and development, an operational set of values which will guide how people should treat each other in the organisation; and the development of an internal customer service strategy in order to maximise the level of support provided to front-line staff in the delivery of service. It is intended to pilot service level agreements between different areas of the Department. It is also worth noting that the Department has engaged in an extensive consultation process with staff in the context of the SMI, for example through the establishment of SMI teamwork groups, and working groups.

4.5 Other Key Issues

A number of other activities which are underway in the Department are now briefly considered insofar as they illustrate how the Department has undertaken the *process* of developing a customer service focus.

4.5.1 Engagement with the Public

The Department regards *consultation* as the key to understanding the needs and expectations of its wide range of customers. Engagement with the public is carried out through the use of a number of mechanisms, which can now be briefly considered:

1. Surveys

The Department has commissioned two independent MRBI polls (1986 and 1996) to establish customer perceptions of its services. Plans are underway to undertake a third survey in the near future. The findings of the most recent independent poll (MRBI, 1996) indicate an overall satisfaction rating of 90% with services provided by the Department. In addition, 85% of respondents considered staff to be courteous and polite. Interestingly, 75% of respondents believed that there was some element of fraud attached to social welfare claims. The findings of this poll were published and sent to all staff. Booklets which summarised the findings were also made available to customers in the local offices. In addition to externally conducted surveys, internally conducted surveys of customers are often carried out at regional level. Thirty-six such surveys were carried out between 1995 to 1998.

2. Customer Panels

The Department has also established ten customer panels, to facilitate greater involvement of its customers. Each panel comprises customers of a particular service e.g. the unemployed, old age pensioners, people with disabilities and carers. Customers are selected at random for membership. Regular meetings are held in which there is open discussion on issues concerning clients. The minutes of panel meetings are fed back to senior management in the Department and action taken where possible. The Department also consults regularly and extensively with community and voluntary organisations.

3. Redress/Complaints:

Comment Cards are available in each Local Office to enable customers to make suggestions or comment on any aspect of the services provided. In addition, dissatisfied customers have two formal means of redress. The Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) was established in 1989 to provide an independent means of redress for customers who were dissatisfied with entitlement decisions made by the Department. The Office is headed by the Chief Appeals Officer, and it employs a number of Appeals Officers who have a statutory right to overturn decisions made by the Department. While the Office is staffed by employees of the Department, a measure of its administrative and statutory independence is borne out by the number of favourable outcomes which take place from the customer's perspective and the public satisfaction with the services of the SWAO 24. In addition, customers who are dissatisfied with aspects of the service provided by the Department have recourse to the Office of the Ombudsman.

4. Communications/Information Dissemination

The Department has also developed communications and information channels to engage with the public in providing enhanced information about its services. For example, while the Department does not have a formal Citizens Charter in place, it communicates standards of customer service to customers, through a set of principles entitled 'What you can expect from us'. This set of standards is displayed in each local office, and it sets out standards in relation to response times, courteousness, complaints procedures and privacy. The Department has a central Information Section, and a central Customer Service Unit. Specialist Information Officers work within the Department in each of the ten regions and are actively involved in enhancing access to information e.g. through technology, information awareness days, radio interviews.

In addition, under the requirements of the *Freedom of Information Act* (1997), the Department has produced documentation to inform their customers as to what information is available within the Department to which they are entitled. The Department in recognition of the complexity of its schemes has also focused on simplifying its information and communications processes. For example, forms and documentation issued by the Department are continuously reviewed to ensure that they comply with its Code of Practice for forms and booklets. This Code of Practice was drawn up following an organisational review which was undertaken in 1996 by a joint team of department staff and external consultants. The aim of the project was to identify ways in which official documentation of the Department could be simplified. There is a recognition however that the Department needs to strive continuously to maximise public understanding of its schemes. This need is also reflected in the recent report of the Office of the Ombudsman (1998)

4.5.2 Focus on Employees

The role of employees is very clearly recognised in the Department and the Strategy Statement outlines a range of mechanisms which will be deployed to 'release the potential of staff' in delivering the Department's strategic objectives. A key consideration in this regard is the recognition of the need to develop HRM policies as an integral part of the corporate planning process. In tracing the development of a customer service ethos in the Department, the role of training and development policies merit considerable attention. The Department has a well resourced Staff Development Unit (SDU), which works in conjunction with the Customer Service Unit²⁵. These units work with Customer Service Liaison Officers and Local Office trainers to equip staff with the core competencies required to deliver high quality customer service to the public. All newly appointed staff in the Department receive induction training which includes a session on customer service concepts and values. In addition a comprehensive Customer Service training programme is delivered in four modules by SDU. These modules cover the following:

- principles of excellent customer service
- putting excellent customer service into practice
- professional telephone skills, drug addiction awareness and work and time management
- effective writing and communication skills and anti-discrimination and anti-racism awareness.

Other issues such as disability awareness and control of fraud and abuse are also addressed in the programme. The four modules were devised following research into best practice in other organisations, and an extensive consultation process with front-line staff. An in-house video was also produced to ensure that the principles of customer service were set in their proper context. Prior to the delivery of this training, the four modules were quality assured by teamwork groups, and piloted by local office trainers. At this stage, almost 2,000 staff have participated in this training programme. It is intended that there will be a complete 'roll-out' of customer service training in 1999. Once completed, the next phase of the roll-out will include all the support areas and internal customer service will be highlighted.

The need for a customer service focus which also incorporates the need for control is very clearly conveyed to staff in training courses through the use of the following message:

<p>Aim – Customer Service and Control of Abuse</p> <p>Right money</p> <p>Right person</p> <p>On time, every time</p>
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A number of other initiatives highlight the Department's recognition of employees in delivering quality services. For example, there is an increasing recognition of the need for effective internal customer service. A number of projects are underway to explore the links between Local Office front-line staff and the role of support units such as IT and Personnel, and to identify ways in which the relationship between delivery and support functions can be enhanced.

The Department has also developed an extensive internal communications network, in recognition of the need to keep staff informed of key initiatives and developments. This is seen as particularly important, given the geographical complexity and diversity of DSCFA's organisational structure. Mechanisms employed to enhance internal communications include extensive use of electronic mail, the publication of a Departmental magazine and a Staff Development Unit Magazine. These publications serve to recognise and communicate achievements and initiatives undertaken in different offices, and to keep staff informed of relevant events such as training programmes and SMI developments.

More recently, the Department has begun to experiment with structured 'bottom-up' approaches to learning and development, as a means of improving customer service. For example, the Department recently undertook an EU funded Leonardo Project which considered and dealt with a range of issues including service to the public. This project was undertaken in conjunction with University College Dublin. It sought to equip staff with learning skills which would enable them to cope with the wider process of organisational change. A questionnaire was issued to staff in two Local Offices to ascertain their views on a number of issues including internal communications, terms and conditions of employment and service to the public. The findings of the survey, which had a response rate of 96%, were presented to senior management for consideration. The project also involved an exchange trip in which two representatives from the Department visited their equivalent office in Sweden and reported back on the approach adopted in Sweden.

The recent *Strategy Statement* stresses the need to build on organisation development initiatives such as this project and the use of teamwork groups, to ensure that 'a bottom up approach to continuous improvement' is achieved. This mirrors the approach recommended in the change literature (see Part Two).

4.5.3 Control

There is a clear view in the Department that customer service and control are 'two sides of the one coin'. Control is seen as an integral part of customer service since the Department has obligations to a wide range of stakeholders, including the taxpayer. The balance between control and customer service has varied since the 1980s, largely a reflection of the prevailing economic climate. For example, in the 1980s, when job opportunities were poor, it was perceived as less acceptable for the Department to adopt a 'control' attitude towards customers when employment opportunities were low. Nowadays it is easier for the Department to balance control/customer service without antagonising the customer for a number of reasons. Firstly, a 'control' approach is now more credible, given the current buoyancy of the economy and the resulting increase in job opportunities. Secondly, customers are becoming less tolerant of social welfare fraud. The Department's Strategy contains a commitment to ensure that control remains a continuous feature of its activities.

4.6 Conclusion

OECD research suggests that a focus on service quality provides an opportunity to either enhance the way existing services are delivered or to re-examine the rationale for existing programmes and their services, and to consider re-engineering the processes by which services are actually delivered. The foregoing case study suggests that DSCFA have been successful in both enhancing and in many senses re-modelling service delivery. A number of facilitating mechanisms appears to have enabled this transformation. Firstly, the extensive and progressive use of I.T. has facilitated structural changes in the service delivery processes of the Department to provide integrated services closer to the customer. Secondly, there is a recognition that in many senses the Department has 'more in common with a bank than it has with many other Civil Service Departments' and the very direct nature of its contact with the public almost forces good customer service practice. Finally, customer service has been developed as an integral part of the Department's culture and processes through its incorporation into the strategic planning process and extensive consultation and training of staff.

Case Study

Meath County Council

5.1 Introduction

In the first Phase of this research, a number of best-practice examples of national, regional and local initiatives to improve the integrated delivery of services were identified (see Humphreys 1998). At that time, some of the main planned IT based developments in County Meath were outlined in brief. However, since 1997, considerable further progress has been made, not just in the IT area, but across a wider front to implement the SMI within that local authority. Qualitative comparisons with the rate of progress made in many other local authorities in Ireland also indicated that developments in Meath were at the cutting edge of change at local government level. Accordingly, it was appropriate with the adoption of a case study approach in the Second Phase, that a thorough analysis was undertaken of the strategy adopted in the County Council and the progress made to date evaluated.

Within Meath County Council, the proposals contained in *Better Local Government* (1996) have been acted upon in a dynamic and innovative manner (see Part Two). The change programme that has been introduced and is being implemented in that local authority was evaluated on the basis of a range of information sources. In addition to a detailed content analysis and evaluation of all documentary material available in either hard-copy, or via the Council's IT-based information system (see 5.6 below), in-depth structured discussions were held with the County Manager, the Assistant County Manager, the County Engineer, the County Secretary, the Finance Officer, the Personnel Officer, the senior IT staff, as well as a number of heads of operational units (Motor Tax, Planning and Housing), and a senior Trade Union representative.

5.2 Local Government Context

In order to understand the thinking behind the radical changes being introduced in Meath, it is important to appreciate both the current remit of local authorities in Ireland, from a service delivery point of view, and the changing environment in which local government has operated in recent years. 'At the historical centre of local government lies the provision of basic environmental services such as roads, 'public health' and sanitary services. To these were added public assistance, housing and personal health services, and local authorities thus became the principal suppliers of the most essential services that citizens were likely to need literally 'from the womb to the tomb.' (Chubb 1983, p.149). This pre-eminence in the provision of key services at local level was, however, undermined by subsequent reforms that removed responsibility for personal health and public assistance services to other public bodies. However, the extension of local authority powers in the areas of physical planning, building and development, together with increasing activity in the area of recreation and amenity provision, still ensures that local authorities have a key role to play in the delivery of important services to the general public, particularly in the environmental area (see also Roche 1982).

In the delivery of these services, however, it is important to understand the changing balance of power relationship between central and local government. A number of commentators have noted the strong degree of control exercised on local authorities from the centre, which has also increased over time (see Collins 1987). The initiatives for enhancing local democracy announced in *Better Local Government* (1996), and the more

recent reform of local government financing, are intended to go some way to redressing this imbalance. However, as the Meath case-study indicates, even within the existing control constraints, it is still possible to achieve fundamental change at local authority level from a customer service viewpoint.

5.3 Meath County Council Overview

County Meath is located to the north of the Dublin conurbation and occupies an area of 234,490 hectares, much of which is agricultural land. In addition to Navan, which is the main administrative and business centre in the county, there are a number other settlements: Ashbourne, Duleek, Dunboyne/Clonee, Dunshaughlin, Kells, Oldcastle, Slane and Trim. The major sources of employment in the county include farming, mining, manufacturing and tourism. However, the southern half of Meath has been significantly affected by the growth of the greater Dublin area. In particular, there has been considerable population growth in many settlements (including Navan) as a consequence of the extension of the Dublin travel to work area deep into the county. The significant net inward migration of residential population has placed considerable demands on social and physical infrastructural provision. Pressures for housing and associated developmental provision have been, and appear likely to remain intense, for the foreseeable future. In marked contrast, the north of the county has continued to experience net outward migration and other socio-economic development problems more characteristic of declining rural areas.

With its headquarters in Navan, Meath County Council is the primary unit of local government in the county and was established in 1899, following the enactment of the Local Government (Ireland) Act 1898. The Council comprises a total of 29 Members directly elected from the five Electoral Districts (EDs) in the county. Elections are normally every five years and are next scheduled for June 1999. Functionally, the Council has responsibility for the delivery of a wide range of public services, including roads, housing, water and sewerage, planning and development, environment, motor taxation, higher education grants. The Council also has powers of competence to take action in the interests of the local community.

The functions of the Council are either reserved or executive in character. Reserved functions are discharged by the County Councillors and involve important matters of policy, including approval of the annual budget, loan arrangements, development plans and the adoption of bye-laws, building programmes etc. Executive functions are performed by the County Manager and include property management, employment of staff, planning decisions and the day to day management of Council business. Although only a medium-sized authority in national terms, the Council's budget for 1998 was £33 million for operational expenditure and circa £40 million on Capital/infrastructural projects. The Council is one of the county's largest single employers with 450 staff in total (see Annex 1). The County also includes Kells, Navan and Trim Urban District Councils (UDCs).

5.4 Strategic Management at the Council

The advent of the Strategic Management Initiative and, in particular the publication of *Better Local Government* (1996), provided senior managers in Meath with a timely opportunity and an objective rationale to press forward with the radical programme of change within the authority, which had already been identified as a key priority. Such change was felt to be necessary for a number of reasons. Drawing upon their experience of working both in Meath and other local authorities, it was felt that developments in Irish public administration over the past few decades had seen the steady erosion of local authorities' roles and responsibilities and a fundamental shift in the balance of power away from local to central government (see 5.2 above). As a consequence of power slipping away, linkages with local communities were felt to have been weakened. All too often a sense of apathy and powerlessness had developed, combined with a fear of change within local authorities themselves. In such a climate, response to local pressure groups was often defensive and inadequate.

Change management provided an opportunity to address these problems in a constructive and dynamic way and to begin to redress the current imbalance between local and central government. In embarking upon this programme of change, however, the view was held that there was little point in accepting the status quo as a given starting point. Strategic management commences by taking a fundamental and critical review of the current position in the light of where the organisation should be were it possible to make a completely fresh start now. In adopting this approach, the Council was driven by the two core values of effectiveness and customer service. It was acknowledged, at the outset, by senior management that to be effective, 'strategic management has to hurt'. 'Management is about dealing with problems' and one of the first key steps was to recognise and gain acknowledgement that problems existed. It was also vital to gain acknowledgement that most policy was determined outside the authority and that the vast majority of the Council's work concerned the delivery of services.

In operationalising BLG (see Part Two), during the period 1996/98, senior management used a number of approaches. At the outset, a series of consultation seminars were held with all staff. Here the opportunity was provided to explore the implications and benefits of implementing the SMI for the authority. In addition, the potential benefits of developing a shared Information Platform for the Council and its work were articulated and explored (see 5.6 below). Because each area of the Council's work tended to be undertaken in functionally separate 'boxes', staff were also paired off into cross-departmental teams to explore 'how work happens'. In this way, linkages were identified and an acknowledgement gained of the need to separate out information-based work (e.g. reception, road maintenance), from resource control (which was the responsibility of middle management) and resource generation/distribution (which was the responsibility of the Management Team). It was also felt strongly that to optimise the human resources available to the Council, people should as far as possible be freed, through the use of IT, from the routine administrative tasks which previously had been predominant in the Council, since it was felt that, 'Machines can do the stupid things'. Customer service training was provided to a wide cross-section of Council staff.

At the same time, a detailed analysis of work flows through the organisation was undertaken and the number of steps analysed from the customer perspective. For example, the comparatively simple task of a member of the public seeking to build a house would involve a complex paper trail within the Council in Navan, which was characterised by many stages but with little value-added by the process at each stage. During 1997, a 'fundamental reappraisal of the activities of the Council was undertaken with a view to establishing if the Council is meeting the needs of the public it serves in the most responsive, efficient and effective way possible' (Meath County Council 1997, p. 36). That examination involved 'a fundamental reappraisal of the following aspects of Meath County Council's operations:

- The relevance and appropriateness of the current service provision and the degree to which it is meeting the needs of the public.
- The present structure within which Meath County Council operates most particularly those which affect this Authority's responsiveness to the public on a daily basis in such areas as Housing, Planning, Higher Education Grants etc.
- The degree of co-operation and cohesion between the UDCs and the County Council with regard to the provision of services at the most appropriate and convenient level.
- An examination of the opportunity of bringing local government out into communities through the greater involvement of community organisations, the upgrading of area offices and the management of service provision at area level.
- The exploitation of information technology in order to improve responsiveness, make information more widely available to the public, facilitate decentralised decision-making and to provide better quality and more timely management information leading to more effective decision-making.

The net result of these management driven exercises in staff consultation and critical self-evaluation has been the development and implementation of radical change programme, which has the following inter-linked features:

1. Corporate Planning
2. New Information Systems
3. Decentralisation of Services and
4. Organisational Restructuring.

Each of these aspects of the approach adopted by Meath needs to be analysed in turn in order to obtain a clear picture of the way in which the SMI is being taken forward within the authority.

5.5 Corporate Plan 1998–2002

As the Foreword to the Corporate Plan makes clear, the inaugural Strategic Plan for the County signifies a genuine and 'conscious effort to map the strategic direction of the organisation into the next century'. Jointly signed by the Chairman and County Manager, acknowledgement is given of the major changes taking place in the local authority environment generally (see 5.2 above), and the particular challenges caused by growth in County Meath during recent years (see 5.3). 'The main purpose of this plan is to inform and guide the strategic management process. In essence strategic management is about the management of change taking into account the aforementioned challenges and opportunities and in particular emerging values from the external environment. It necessitates new ways of working to address these values, and these new ways require a fundamental review of organisational structures, processes and culture'. The Council's mission is 'To promote and implement the sustainable development of our County in partnership with local communities so as to improve the quality of life and living environment of all our citizens'.

In the implementation of the Plan and in the everyday operation of business, Members and Staff will be guided by seven core values:

1. Tré neart le Chéile (We are strong together)
2. Participative Local democracy
3. Quality Service
4. Equality and Impartiality
5. Sustainable Development

6. Social Inclusion
7. Value for Money

To operationalise these values, and deliver on the Council's mission for the period of the Plan, nine areas are identified, each with its own strategic objective(s) and actions (see Annex 2 for a complete listing). These nine areas are:

- Enhancing Local Democracy
- Customer Service
- Information Technology
- Organisation and Human Resource Development
- Planning and Economic Development
- Infrastructural Development
- Our Environment
- Social, Community and Cultural Development
- Financial Resources and Value for Money.

The ordering of these key areas is also deliberate. Customer service values follow on naturally from deliberate strides to enhance local democracy. 'A local authority like any other organisation exists to serve the public. This suggests convenience, accessibility, responsiveness, courtesy and such like. Accessibility has implications in terms of location, buildings, reception areas, signposting, telephone contact, internet access, the simplicity of application forms, access for the disabled etc. Equally important to physical accessibility is the question of psychological accessibility in the way the organisation presents itself in terms of openness, courtesy and the welcome it provides. Any organisation must provide clear information in relation to its services and should communicate well in clear understandable language with people both in the office and in their homes using available media. Equally there must be clarity about things that cannot be done or about why things cannot be done in a particular way'.

Although Customer Service is dealt with under a separate area for action, under the Plan, it is clear that customer service values permeate the thinking in all areas of Council policy. Thus, within the strategic objective of 'Enhancing Local Democracy', one of the four key strategies is 'to promote through the process of local democracy, the role of Meath County Council as the principal service provider meeting the needs and wishes of the people of the County' (see Annex 2). Similarly, one of the strategies to be adopted under the promotion of Information Technology is 'to use IT as the platform for the delivery of a more responsive customer service'. In each area progress is seen as essential to the achievement of improved customer service. Progress in each area is also acknowledged as being inter-linked with high levels of interdependence. Arrangements for implementing and monitoring the Plan are contained in Annex Three.

5.6 New Information Systems

In order to exploit fully the opportunities provided by the informed application of improved IT systems for the quality of services delivered to the citizen, as well as to transform fundamentally the manner in which information flowed and work was undertaken within the Council, Meath has adopted wholeheartedly an IT-based approach to the way in which it conducts its business. This approach was facilitated by the arrival in 1996 of a new senior manager with a very strong IT background. At that time the IT environment was characterized by a number of standard Local Government Computer Services Board (LGCSB) systems, e.g. in the finance area, with only limited use of networked resources, such as e-mail, for internal communication.

The IT capability of the Council was significantly increased further with the arrival of new staff with particular experience of working in a web-environment. Drawing upon the SMI consultation process described at 5.4 above, a critical evaluation was taken of existing IT-based systems, given the strategic change of direction the organisation now wished to take. In terms of developing an integrated Information Platform across the Council, a number of significant shortcomings were identified: current systems were based on dated solutions; the technology was neither management, staff nor user friendly; centralised processing was tying up scarce staff resources and offering poor value for money and the Council's IT environment was unduly complex given its comparatively small size. There were 10 mainframe systems, three Unix systems, as well as word processing, database, spreadsheet and e-mail/scheduler solutions. The key strategic tool adopted by the Council, in response to this challenge, was the development of a Council-wide Intranet (see Humphreys 1998).

In essence, the *Intranet* uses a familiar Internet approach to addressing the organisation's management and other informational needs. Although still being developed and improved, the Intranet currently provides all staff with a wide spectrum of information from the Minutes and Agenda of Council and other formal Meetings, contact details for officials and Members, activity reports and detailed breakdowns for many areas of the Council's work (e.g. housing, planning, roads etc.), key policy documents, advertisements, Manager's Orders, together with personnel and staff information, and a facility for alerting all staff of up to date developments (e.g. road closures) that may be the subject of public inquiry. It is planned to provide a summary version of this information platform, broken down to Electoral District level, for elected members, in the form of an *Extranet*. Similarly, information on Council services will be made available to the general public via the *Internet*.

Strategically, the development of the Intranet has sought:

- to ensure that all levels within the organisation have access to timely information to improve responsiveness;
- to satisfy the urgent requirement for the integration of IT systems to generate one corporate database;
- to help facilitate the process of area based management and
- in future, to enable front-line staff at all locations to directly input service requests.

Hand in hand with the progress of the Intranet has been the development of a Geographic Information System (GIS) for roads, planning, environment and other geographically referenced data, as well as the extensive use of document-imaging technology to facilitate progress towards the paperless office²⁶. The move from manual to IT-based systems has already transformed a number of parts of the Council's work and enabled areas, such as motor taxation, which have been significantly affected by the growth of the County to cope with rapidly increased demand without increasing staff resources. Over 100,000 manual Driving Licence Files and 47,000 vehicle files have been dispensed with through IT based document management. In addition, between 200-500 visitors per day and circa 150,000 per annum motor tax applications are now handled, the volume of business having grown by circa eight percent over the past two years. In 1998, an electronic filing system was introduced into the Planning and General Purposes areas, as a further step in retaining all Council files electronically.

5.7 Decentralisation of Services

Enabled through the systematic development of new IT-based systems, the lynchpin of Meath's approach to improved customer service is the decentralisation of services away from Navan closer to the citizen. This approach was informed by deficiencies in existing arrangements:

- Service provision, apart from information and advice, was all delivered centrally from the Council Head Office in Navan,
- Existing area offices at Navan, Kells, Duleek, Dunshaughlin and Ashbourne acted solely as engineering depots for the roads programme, and providing accommodation for the Area Engineer and Area Clerk. The geographical boundaries of the six engineering areas and 18 work divisions did not coincide well with Electoral Districts.
- The Urban District Councils at Navan, Trim and Kells had their own offices with no integration with the County Council Area Offices.
- The twelve Library Branches at Navan, Trim, Kells, Oldcastle, Nobber, Ashbourne, Duleek, Athboy, Dunshaughlin, Slane, Laytown and Dunboyne were under-utilised as information sources on Council services.

On the basis of the detailed analysis and fundamental review of current operations and methods of service delivery, which was undertaken in 1997 (see 5.4 above), the Council Members and Senior Management agreed upon the following approach:

- In future all services, work programmes, reporting procedures etc. should be on the basis of the five Electoral Districts.
- New District Offices would be provided at Duleek, Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin.
- Existing Area and UDC offices in Kells, Navan and Trim would be integrated, either in existing or new buildings depending upon capacity.
- As far as possible, existing services and points of contact with the public would be located at District level in order to optimise customer service.
- Every effort would be made to deal with local issues at properly scheduled and public Area Meetings, thus freeing the Council to focus on more strategic policy issues.
- Finally, a major programme of integration of public services would be undertaken in consultation with other public sector bodies.

It was felt that for all new service centres, integration of services would be the primary consideration. This integration would be accommodated in building design, shared reception facilities, multi-skilling of staff through joint training programmes, office sharing arrangements and the exploitation of IT. To operationalise this strategic approach to the integration of services provided by public bodies at local level in Meath, a project team which included representatives from the following organisations: the North-Eastern Health Board, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (see Part Four), FÁS, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners, an Garda Síochána, the National Social Services Board, Meath County Enterprise Board, Meath Tourism and Teagasc. The aim of this team was to explore opportunities for sharing customer service desks and other office space, as well as electronic media or IT platforms and the dissemination of primary information on a range of services, in order to deal, as far as possible, with every aspect of the customers' needs. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the first new District Office opened at Duleek in April 1999 incorporates provision for Health Board as well as Council staff.

With regard to the decentralisation project overall, an internal project team was established comprising technical and administrative staff to discuss the operational and staffing implications of the proposals. In parallel, a Members' Consultative Panel was formed of two members of each Electoral District and two representatives from each UDC, with collective responsibility for bringing forward proposals to the full Council for approval. Following the Panel's report in July 1998, the Council agreed that Area Meetings would be held on a monthly basis, in advance of full Council meetings, to allow referral forward for decision where necessary. Such Area Meetings would also be open to the public and press and held in the evenings in order to facilitate attendance. In addition to Duleek which has already opened, local service centres and Area Meetings will take place at Ashbourne, Dunshaughlin, Trim, Navan and Kells. This programme, which is estimated to cost £5 million overall, has been facilitated by a grant of £1.2 million from the Department of the Environment and Local Government as part of its initiative to support appropriate one-stop-shop centres across the country²⁷. Annex Four contains details of the activities it is planned to provide through the network of District Offices.

5.8 Organisational Restructuring

In order to implement a strategic approach to the delivery of Council services, to optimise the benefits available for members, staff and the public alike from the application of leading edge IT solutions and to decentralise effectively as many Council services as possible to bring them closer to the citizen, it was also necessary to overhaul fundamentally the existing organisational structure of the Council. This organisational review was informed by individual interviews with all staff in those areas of the Council's work principally involved in direct service delivery or the administrative back-up to service delivery (see 5.4 above). The purpose of these discussions was to seek to establish:

- The function of each Department and the appropriateness of the functions to these departments
- The decision-making process and the level of delegation with particular reference to seeking opportunities to streamline this process.
- Making a preliminary judgement as to whether these services/functions could be delivered/performed at local level.
- Gaps or deficiencies in service provision occasioned by poor processes/systems or disproportionate resource allocation.
- With regard to some of the main services, demand patterns on an Electoral District basis.

In those areas, where there was a strong *a priori* argument for very limited potential decentralisation, this analysis was not undertaken. These areas primarily comprised road design, major infrastructural planning, planning control, fire services and the core financial functions. It was felt that these functions are central by nature and required a particular discipline that was neither practical nor efficient to reproduce at local level.

In taking forward the recommendations contained in *Better Local Government* (1996), the Council had already agreed to the establishment of a Corporate Policy Group (CPG) and associated Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs). In Meath, four SPCs have been established: Planning and Development; Environment; Transportation; Housing, Social and Community. To support this strategic focus, a three-tier organisational structure is being introduced (see Figure Four):

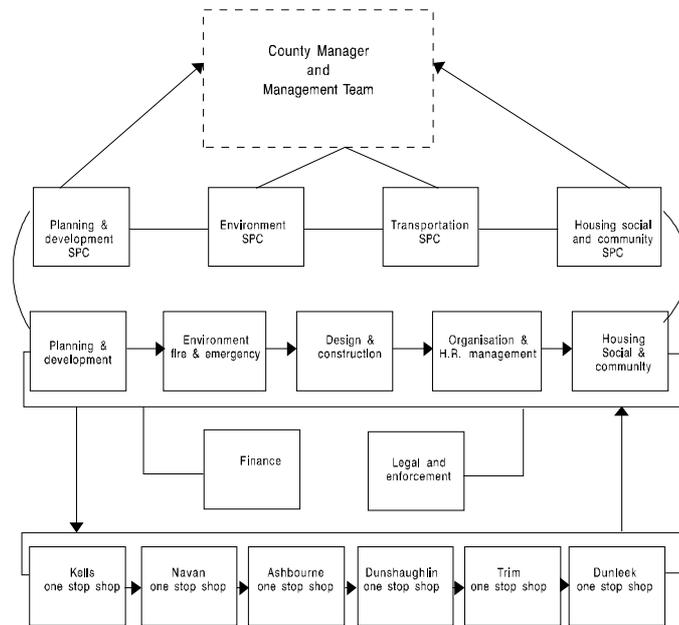
- A top tier comprising the County Manager and the Management Team (i.e. County Engineer, Assistant County Manager and County Secretary). When national agreement has been obtained, it is proposed that this structure would be replaced, under the County Manager, by Directors of Service each with a responsibility for an individual SPC, whose core functions would be policy formulation; resource creation and allocation; performance management and serving the needs of elected members. It is also envisaged that each Director of Service will have particular responsibility for an individual District Office.
- A middle tier engaged in a core activity centred on the physical, natural and social environment, together with organisation and human resource development. These activities are underpinned by finance and legal resources. The key functions for this group will be to assist in the policy formulation process; to enable the process of policy implementation and 'getting right the instruments of service delivery' (see McLoughlin 1998).
- A front-line whose primary function is to deliver decentralised services. The main functions of this tier are the implementation of policy and programmes; customer service; identifying service gaps and servicing Local Area Committees.

Under this new structure, it can also be seen that legal and enforcement activities are to be brought together into one centrally based core function. At present, these functions are undertaken in six different Units: Finance; Planning; Environment; Fire Service; Design and Construction; as well as Housing, Social and Community. It is also planned to integrate in a similar way a range of related financial activities into one finance section. These activities including Revenue Collection; Asset Management (Land); Loans and Grants; Cash Management; Internal Audit/Value For Money; Resource Creation and Budgetary Control. It is of course envisaged that applications for loans and grants as well as account queries in relation to rents, rates and other payments will be dealt with through the District Offices.

5.9 Key Issues

In some ways, it is difficult to evaluate fully the effective benefits obtained from a customer service viewpoint, by the radical changes that are being implemented in County Meath, until the network of decentralized offices and reorganized management structure have had an opportunity to function for 12-18 months. However, it is absolutely clear that the County Council, through the leadership of its senior managers and the active support of its elected members, has pressed forward with the implementation of the reforms proposed in BLG with innovation and vigour. Internal and external communications, as well as working practices, have been and are being fundamentally transformed by the innovative development of appropriate IT systems. There has been substantial investment in staff training, not just with regard to the definition and use of new IT systems, but also in improved customer service and new approaches to management.

Figure 4
Meath County Council New Organisational Structure



Compared to the national-level case-study (see Part Four), direct engagement with the general public in the formulation and development of improvements in service delivery systems has been quite limited. In the busy motor taxation office, as well as the administration of higher education grants, customer feedback has been used to improve the services delivered. Similarly, in the development of the Integrated Area Plans for Navan and other UDCs, there has been effective consultation and partnership with other local agencies. While it is acknowledged within the Council that further initiatives will need to be taken to consult more frequently with the general public in relation to other specific services delivered, this difference in approach between national and local government approaches reflects in part at least the direct democratic accountability already afforded by the local authority system. This established pattern of local accountability will be developed even further through the introduction of Area Meetings and District Offices.

Findings and Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

Achieving a significant and lasting improvement in the quality of services delivered by the Irish public service to the citizen has been a cornerstone of the Strategic Management Initiative since its inception in 1994. As *Delivering Better Government* (1996) makes clear 'the achievement of an excellent service for the Government and the public as customers and clients at all levels' is a key objective. Indeed, for the general public as well as the Irish taxpayer, the extent to which the public service, in its many forms, delivers on that objective could prove to be the litmus test by which the credibility of the SMI change programme as a whole will be judged. After all, 'Government, including local government, exists to serve the people' (*Better Local Government* 1996).

This Discussion Paper explores some of the key public management issues raised by this challenge. However, the degree of change required should not be underestimated. As the findings from the first phase of this study made clear, '... there is still a very long way to go before it can be asserted that Irish public service organisations have taken on board wholeheartedly the need to be customer focused ... Too often a very strong qualitative impression was gained that in many bodies still ... a genuine commitment to addressing the needs of the general public remained relatively low in the pecking order of managerial priorities compared, for example, to meeting the internal political demands of the system. Rarely were customer needs placed centre stage' (Humphreys 1998, p.77).

The aims of this Discussion Paper have been two-fold:

- to identify, evaluate and share the latest information on effective mainstreaming approaches being adopted within Ireland and
- to identify, evaluate and share the latest information on new ideas and initiatives being developed elsewhere, which are both appropriate to Irish conditions and could demonstrate how customer needs can be placed at the centre of an organisation's mission and vision.

These aims are addressed by a thorough review of the quality customer service and change management literature, a careful review of relevant experiences in other public services and a detailed analysis of the progress made in two Irish case study organisations: the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and Meath County Council. Each of these sources of information provided insights on the key management issues to be addressed if the mainstreaming of customer service values is to be realised in public service organisations more widely.

6.2 Key Management Issues

Drawing upon the research findings discussed in this paper, eight major areas can be identified that merit further active consideration by public service managers seeking to engage effectively with the organisational challenges presented by the whole-hearted adoption and operationalisation of customer service values. These areas are:

- Linking Customer Service with the Corporate Planning Process
- Engaging Effectively with the Public
- Fundamental Organisational Restructuring
- Effective Use of Information Technology
- Role of Employees

- Balancing Control and Customer Service
- Separating Policy and Service Delivery
- Achieving Real Improvements in Standards

Each of these areas is interlinked and needs to be summarised in turn.

6.2.1 Linking Customer Service with the Corporate Planning Process

The research evidence provided from both the literature review and case study analysis indicates that if a customer service ethos is to be mainstreamed in a public service organisation, then such an ethos needs to be thoroughly integrated with the corporate planning process. If it is not, then there is considerable potential for the espousal of customer service values to remain simply that. Unless quality customer service values are integral to the corporate and business planning processes, then 'customer service' will remain an isolated activity with little prospect of widespread success.

The service quality model outlined by Gaster (1995) (see Figure Three) offers a meaningful and comprehensive framework for organisations within which quality service can be thus integrated. Both the national and local government case studies highlight the success that can be achieved by this integrative process as a means of translating the content of customer service (values) into action. The case studies also clearly indicate that political and senior management leadership and belief in the value of customer service as a strategic objective is a key factor in facilitating this integrative process.

6.2.2 Engaging Effectively with the Public

The linking of customer service into the corporate planning process also provides a framework within which the expectations of stakeholders can be assessed and subsequently compared with their perceptions of service received. In turn, this regular feedback between service delivery and service development provides the potential for customer service to become part of a cyclical activity of strategic management as opposed to a 'once-off initiative'. The two case study organisations which are examined in this paper have recognised this vital link and have taken steps to ensure that customer values and objectives are an inherent part of the strategic planning process. In order to receive effective feedback on the quality of services delivered, as well to improve the quality of those services, public service organisations must engage effectively with the public they are paid to serve.

Quality customer service organisations are listening organisations. Previous research has identified a wide spectrum of different levels of engagement with the public: from information sharing to direct input to the development of services themselves (see Humphreys 1998). Evidence from other countries indicates that there is a continuously evolving range of approaches to listening to the customers of public services, from comment cards to People's Panels. Both case-study organisations have made specific efforts to position themselves closer to their client base. In Meath, the involvement of the elected representatives, the development of Area Meetings and decentralisation of service provision are all examples of this approach. Likewise, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs has used an extensive range of consultative tools to seek to both monitor customer perceptions of its services and to make the vital link between expectations, perceptions and policy. The regionalisation and localisation of service delivery systems, the regular use of market research tools as well as customer panels are all examples of these efforts. However, this research indicates that whatever approach is adopted, and each organisation needs to decide the particular approach most suited to its needs, that approach must treat the citizen as an endogenous rather than exogenous variable in their model for change.

6.2.3 *Fundamental Organisational Restructuring*

Gaster (1995) has pointed out that if quality processes are to be implemented in a lasting way then the right organisational structure is essential. Likewise, Schein (1985) a decade earlier argued that while it is relatively easy to change the artefacts of a company, such as its customer service image, it is less easy to change the value system and underlying assumptions. To achieve this end, fundamental organisational restructuring is normally required in order to break the cycle of mediocrity which characterises too many public bodies from a customer service point of view.

Both Meath County Council and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs have risen to this challenge and engaged in fundamental organisational restructuring in order to improve their effectiveness and the quality of services they deliver to their stakeholders. Depending upon the scale and time-frame within which the restructuring takes place, such change can be extremely painful for those committed to existing patterns of working. It is the responsibility of all those tasked with implementing such fundamental reorganisation to manage these changes as effectively as possible.

6.2.4 *Effective Use of Information Technology*

Bellamy (1996) correctly draws the distinction between automation and informatisation. Informatisation emphasises the role of IT as means of integrating data sources and services to break down functional boundaries and thus enhance the nature and range of services provided to the customer. Either implicitly or explicitly, both case study organisations have used IT in a creative and innovative manner to transform radically not only the quality but also the nature of the services they deliver. They have used technologies and available resources effectively in a manner which is far more widely reproducible across the Irish public service. The effective deployment of IT solutions has been a hallmark of the approach adopted within the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs to improving the accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of the services it delivers. Similarly, Meath County Council has been innovative and pioneering in its informatisation of the organisation in order to transform both its effectiveness and standards of customer service, as well as to enhance local democracy. It is also worth observing that in both organisations, there was visible and active support for IT development at senior management level.

6.2.5 *Role of Employees*

Fundamental restructuring and the re-engineering of organisations through the use of IT does not in itself, however, provide any guarantee of buy-in to change by employees. Such buy-in is essential given the key role played by employees in the quality service improvement process, a recognition which is also reflected in the approach adopted in a number of OECD countries (see Part Three), as well as EFQM 2000. For example, it is recognised in the US public service that 'without satisfied employees, you cannot have satisfied customers'. Similarly the Australian Public Service has taken this argument further by directly engaging employees with customers in the service improvement process through the use of value creation workshops.

The literature reviewed suggests that while it may be comparatively easy to address the *content* issues of customer service (for example by identifying and agreeing upon a set of values) the *process* of mainstreaming customer service ethos is an altogether more challenging process, since this requires significant change in the organisation's culture. The centrality of employees in quality customer service has been recognised by DSCFA, as evidenced by a number of initiatives including:

- the use of internal surveys of employees;
- the development (through consultation with staff) and delivery of customised training across the Department;

- the involvement of staff in the strategic planning process; and
- the Department's commitment to continue to build on 'bottom-up' approaches to learning and development as a means of maximising the potential of *all* staff in the organisation.

Similarly Meath County Council involved staff in consultations around the development of the Information Platform, the drafting of the Corporate Plan and development of its radical policy for decentralisation. Looking more broadly across the Irish public service, it is perhaps surprising that, given the emphasis in other countries on schemes such as *Investors in People*, comparatively little attention has been paid to the development of a service-wide standard to promote the people part of the SMI change programme.

6.2.6 *Balancing Control and Customer Service*

A review of the international literature highlights an increasing focus on the delivery of efficient and effective public services, and this is echoed in the Irish context (*Delivering Better Government, 1996, Better Local Government, 1998*). Achieving the twin aims of *efficiency* and *effectiveness* in the context of service delivery often necessitates the use of mechanisms to control the abuse of systems, in recognition of the demands not only of the customer but the wider range of stakeholders. While this issue is not a focal point of the literature on customer service, it emerged as a key concern in one of the cases chosen for this study, the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. This is not entirely surprising given the significant annual expenditure by the Department and the growing public concern regarding fraud or abuse of systems.

The case study suggests that the Department has achieved a balance between control and customer service by viewing them as 'two sides of the one coin'. This was illustrated by the integration of the control function (formerly Inspection Branch) into the regional management structure, which ensured that customer service and control are better reconciled. The need to streamline operations in the context of control was also stressed at local government level (*Better Local Government, 1998*). There was a recognition in Meath County Council of the importance of control as an integral part of the provision of quality service, and the use of new technology provides the potential to 'free-up' resources to focus more on areas such as planning enforcement. The key lesson is that organisations need to identify ways within which the twin needs for control and customer service can be met, without one compromising the other.

6.2.7 *Separating Policy and Service Delivery*

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argue that there should be a clear distinction between 'steering' (policy making) and 'rowing' (service delivery) because these functions require very different sets of competencies (p. 35). In a number of other countries, this separation of policy and service delivery functions has been adopted with considerable vigour. In the UK, during the 1980s, many Government Departments were fundamentally restructured to create separate executive agencies directly responsible for service delivery. In Part Three, the similar approach adopted in Australia with the establishment of Centrelink is discussed in detail.

While separation of policy and service delivery is not a prerequisite for mainstreaming customer service, it is interesting to observe that efforts were made to adopt this approach in both organisations studied, albeit in a less dramatic form than that evident in other OECD countries. Within the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, the administrative separation of the SWS reflected similar thinking, although the degree of separation from the policy function or Aireacht is not as marked as in other countries. Within Meath, part of the rationale for the establishment of Area Meetings and the re-organisation of existing functional divisions, under Directors of Service, is designed to allow both the Council and the senior management team to focus more on strategic policy issues. Key concerns evident from the research include the need to reconcile control issues with customer service, and the need to ensure that there are adequate feedback channels between policy and service delivery.

6.2.8 Achieving Real Improvements in Standards

The whole purpose of adopting a quality approach to the delivery of public services is to achieve tangible improvements in standards. In many countries, a charter approach has been adopted which has involved an explicit commitment by public service bodies to raise their standards of service provision progressively over time. It is perhaps both surprising and disappointing that this international movement has received such little attention in the Irish context. One reason for this may be a misconception as to what would be involved. Some public bodies have already made explicit commitments to given standards of service. Going a step further through the adoption of a charter approach would not appear to require significant further demands. It is also important to stress that, as experience in the UK has shown, comparatively small public organisations (including schools) have used the Charter Mark approach to help transform the way in which they conduct their business and engage with their stakeholders. What a charter approach does involve is an explicit public commitment to, and accountability for, progressive improvements in standards of service.

6.3 Some Concluding Remarks

Gaster's approach (1995) to defining a quality customer service model has provided a valuable framework for the evaluation of the international and case-study evidence discussed in this paper. It is therefore appropriate to note some of her concluding remarks. 'The notion of pluralism is ... helpful in remembering that people have different roles: people are at the same time consumers and citizens, employees and voters, professionals and politicians. Each has a part to play in quality, in the cycle of policy development and implementation that is at the root of the process. Recognizing and welcoming this diversity and complexity is what quality ought to be about. Public service quality is a collective enterprise; it will not thrive on individualism, divisiveness and standardization. It is an essential part of a modern manager's tools for the job, requiring a combination of open-mindedness, precision and responsiveness and depending, in the end, on old-fashioned but still much-needed public sector values' (p. 137).

While not underestimating the extent of the challenge ahead, a primary aim of this paper has been to demonstrate in a practical way the radical improvements in the quality of services that can be delivered to the public given sufficient commitment of those in the organisation responsible for its leadership. That leadership exists at many levels within an organisation. In plotting appropriate action, organisations will differ in their circumstances and, in consequence, their approach. However, in articulating that approach, best practice both in Ireland and elsewhere clearly indicates that organisations need to listen and respond positively to their stakeholders, including their own staff and the public they serve.

NOTES:

1. However, at both a conceptual and a practical level, the distinction between national and local services can be difficult to sustain. (See Coughlan and de Buitlear, 1996, for further reading on this issue).
2. It must also be noted that, from January 1999, a new system for financing local government came into force. The Local Government Fund amounts to £590 million which comprises a baseline provision of £270 million (to be increased in future years in line with inflation) and the proceeds from motor taxation.
3. In view of the plethora of terminologies surrounding this topic, the terms 'service quality', 'service delivery' and 'customer service' are used inter-changeably in this paper.
4. It has been pointed out by Gaster (1995) that in the context of improving service delivery, decentralisation is a means to an end, not an end in itself. For decentralisation to be effective, it is argued that control must be devolved to front-line staff since greater autonomy and flexibility leads to better service and performance.
5. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argue that there should be a clear distinction between 'steering' (policy making) and 'rowing' (service delivery) since these functions require very different sets of competencies. In a similar vein, Lawton and Rose (1994) point out that the creation of agencies to deliver public services has been a major tool of public service managerial reform in the 1980's and 1990's in other countries.
6. Bellamy (1995) suggests that business process re-engineering is being used increasingly to modify or streamline working practices in hand with the effective use of information technology (IT).
7. Earlier models would include the NCC Service Wheel, which was developed by the UK National Consumer Council (1986). This incorporates a range of customer service evaluation criteria (e.g. access, choice, quality, redress). Similarly, Parasuraman et al's (1985) service quality measurement instrument, SERVQUAL, which measures customer perception based on a range of service quality criteria.
8. Further details of EFQM 2000's Vision and Mission are available at <http://www.efqm.org/efqm2000.htm>
9. Bellamy makes a distinction between automation and 'informatisation' and argues that informatisation emphasises the role of electronic networks as a means of integrating data sources and services, thus breaking down functional boundaries, which in turn enhances the nature and range of services provided to the customer.
10. In contrast, service delivery reforms in Canada have been fuelled by a growing desire among citizens to be more involved in their country's governance and mechanisms such as consultative fora are used as a means of enhancing citizen engagement and service quality (see Desautels, 1997).
11. The nearest equivalent scheme to IIP in the Irish context is 'Excellence through People' which is managed by FAS. To date, involvement of Irish public service organisations in this programme has been limited.
12. Another notable development in the APS was the announcement by the Prime Minister in March 1997 that from July 1997 all Commonwealth agencies would be required to put in place a service charter. These charters represent a public commitment by each agency to deliver high quality services and where relevant to specify specific standards for service delivery. The charters are developed through active consultation with customers.
13. In contrast, in Sweden a bill entitled 'Central Government Administration in the Citizens' Service' was enacted in March 1998 and this underpinned the action programme introduced by the government to improve service quality from the citizen's perspective, for example by more effective information provision.
14. The results of one recent Finnish study are of relevance here. In a survey to ascertain the views of citizens on public service organisations, the preliminary results indicate that there has been a positive change in how citizens view those government service organisations that were commercialised in the early 1990s e.g. the Vehicle Inspection Centre and the Post Offices, are now seen to be more service-minded, flexible and efficient than at the time of the previous survey of 1987 (Holkeri and Summa, 1998)

15. Following a change of government in July 1997, the Department of Social Welfare was renamed the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, in recognition of its wider remit.
16. The agencies which operate under the aegis of the Department are the Combat Poverty Agency, the Pensions Board, and the National Social Services Board.
17. Prior to 1991, a dual grading structure was in operation at Higher Executive Officer (HEO) level in the department, in which there were 'outdoor' HEO's who dealt with control of abuse and 'indoor' HEO's who managed each local office. Both sets of officers reported to two separate central offices in Dublin. As a result of the regionalisation programme, the former 'outdoor' branch of officers have now been integrated into the regional management structure.
18. FÁS is the national training and employment authority. Established in 1988, its functions include the operation of training and employment programmes, support for co-operative and community based enterprise, and the development of initiatives to support the long-term unemployed.
19. Short Term Schemes in the Department include Unemployment Benefit, Unemployment Assistance, Disability and Maternity Benefit. In contrast, Long Term Schemes include Child Benefit Allowance, and a range of Pensions.
20. LO-CALL facilities enable the customer to contact any office in the country for the price of a local call. It is intended that eventually such facilities will be available throughout the department.
21. This project was initially launched as the Integrated Social Services System (ISSS) in August 1996. For further information see Government of Ireland, (1996).
22. The Department's Strategy Statement *Inclusion, Innovation and Partnership* was launched in 1998 in accordance with the requirements of the Public Service Management Act, 1997. This Act requires Departments to produce statements of strategy on annual basis for the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Statement was developed through a wide number of internal groups, including 12 SMI teamwork groups and 3 working groups.
23. The Department outlines a number of key functional values in its Statement which will shape how people deal with each other within the organisation. These are: Responsibility and Involvement, Capabilities, Commitment, Openness, Staff Welfare, Co-operation
24. In 1996, 16% of appeals were allowed by the SWAO, 9% were partially allowed, and 26% of decisions were revised by the Department on foot of appeals. The SWAO carried out a customer survey in 1996, in which there was an overall satisfaction rating of 69% with its services (this rate was 80% where appellants received a favourable outcome). For further details, see the Annual Report of the SWAO (SWAO, 1996)
25. The Customer Service Unit was recently renamed the Corporate Development Unit, in recognition of its broader role in the strategic planning process.
26. The GIS database currently includes
 - Detailed traffic accidents records
 - Over 2,000 Planning Files, with full details of application and decision type along with details of application, location, architect etc.
 - Over 4000 river sampling records
 - Together with effluent, waste water treatment, landfill records.
27. Other successful initiatives were funded in Laois, Waterford, Fingal, Kerry, Kildare and Donegal.

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ANNEX 1
MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL
Human Resources

STAFF			
MANAGEMENT/ADMINISTRATIVE/CLERICAL	NUMBER	MALE	FEMALE
County Manager	1	1	
Assistant County Manager	1	1	
County Secretary	1	1	
Finance Officer	1	1	
Administrative Officer	5	4	1
Senior Staff Officer	6	5	1
Staff Officer	7	3	4
Assistant Staff Officer	12	6	6
Clerical Officer	64	8	56
Librarians	23	3	20
Revenue Collector	10	10	
Storekeeper	1	1	
Social Worker	1		1
Development Officer	1	1	
Recreation Manager	1		1
Arts Officer	1		1
Receptionist	1		1
Civil Defence	1	1	
Veterinary	1	1	
Coroner	1	1	
	140	48	92
TECHNICAL			
County Engineer	1	1	
Senior Executive Engineer	8	8	
Executive Engineer	12	12	
Chief Fire Officer	1	1	
Assistant Chief Fire Officer	2	2	
Assistant Planner	6	5	1
Technician	15	13	2
Clerk of Works	1	1	
	46	43	3
CRAFT, GENERAL, SUPERVISORY AND OTHER STAFF			
Supervisory	20	20	
Craftsmen	10	10	
General Operatives	128	128	
Drivers	22	22	
Water and Sewerage	22	22	
Fire Service	49	49	
School Wardens	8	1	7
Caretakers and other	9	9	
	268	261	7
TOTAL	450	352	98

Source: Meath County Council Annual Report 1997

ANNEX 2
MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL

OBJECTIVE ONE

To enhance local democracy

STRATEGIES

To develop joint working relationships with local development agencies and the urban authorities in County Meath to ensure a sense of 'completeness' in policy development.

To ensure that the policy making role of local authorities is highlighted and recognised.

To improve linkages with local communities with a view to developing a more participative local democracy. To promote through the process of local democracy the role of Meath County Council as the principal service provider meeting the needs and wishes of the people of the County.

ACTIONS

Continue through the forum of the County Strategy Group the close working relationship with the local development agencies.

Ensure that actions outlined elsewhere in this Plan in the context of Organisation and Human Resource Development and Customer Services service to enhance local democracy and improve its image.

Establish as soon as possible the planned Strategic Policy Committees to highlight the policy role of elected members and to allow for broader involvement in the democratic process by other agencies.

Use area meetings as a forum for discussion and decision on matters of local importance in order to allow for a concentration on policy issues at full Council Meetings.

Facilitate where possible prior consultation on all Council plans in relation to infrastructure and other development.

Prepare and implement a Training Programme for Members to accord with their wishes and to take account of any recommendations forthcoming from the Department of the Environment of the Local Authority Members Associations.

Encourage and reward community involvement in Co-Financed Schemes and joint working arrangements.

Highlight through the annual performance review of this plan the importance of local democracy and its role in the development of the County.

Examine during the currency of this plan opportunities for enhancing democracy using information technology as a means of consultation and feedback.

OBJECTIVE TWO

To provide a convenient, responsive and courteous service

STRATEGIES

- To aim to maximise the integration of local government services in County Meath together with integration of other public services where practicable.
- To provide a convenient local government service through the development of local service centres/one stop shops.
- To improve communication with the public through various media including information technology.
- To ensure that actions taken under the Organisation and Human Resource Development Objective complement this objective.

ACTIONS

- Develop local service centres/one stop shops in Ashbourne, Duleek, Dunshaughlin, Trim, Navan and Kells.
- Integrate the County Council Area Office with the UDC offices in Navan, Trim and Kells in the development of the one stop shops.
- Use all public libraries as information points for the dissemination of information on local authority services.
- Draw up with the urban authorities joint work programmes aimed at dealing with problems as 'wholes' regardless of operational boundaries.
- Implement The Freedom of Information Act to ensure speedy and easy access to all relevant information.
- Consult with the National Standards Authority of Ireland with a view to undertaking a Quality Initiative Programme.
- Set up and operate a Customer Complaint System and conduct Customer Surveys.
- Examine the possibility of increasing the profile of Area Meetings to allow for public attendance and submissions.
- Use local radio as an effective means of communicating news and information on local authority services.
- Keep the Emergency Plan under constant review and to test procedures annually.
- Produce an annual newsletter outlining the Council's plan for the year and progress during the year to be distributed as a supplement to the Annual Report.
- A new Telephone System will be installed to incorporate 'breakout lines' with direct access to a required service department.
- As part of the Staff Training Programme interpersonal skills will be highlighted as a priority training area.
- Opportunities for delegation of responsibility will be maximised in an effort to improve responsiveness.
- As outlined in the IT Strategy, full use will be made of the potential of IT to improve responsiveness and bring information to people in a more convenient and speedy fashion.
- Continue to promote the use of Irish and train specific staff in this regard.
- Appoint an Access Officer to ensure that people with disabilities are given equality of treatment in terms of access.
- Deal promptly, fairly and impartially with all applicants for local authority services.

OBJECTIVE THREE

To act as a leader in and promoter of the information society

STRATEGIES

- To develop an advanced technological/telecommunications infrastructure capable of supporting locally based service provision.
- To help foster the creation of an inclusive information society.
- To fully explore and exploit the potential of information technology to enhance democracy and broaden citizen participation in local government.
- To use information technology as the platform for the delivery of a more responsive customer service generally.

ACTIONS

- Ensure that the necessary financial resources are in place to meet the required investment in IT hardware and software.
- Complete the necessary telecommunications infrastructure for the development of a wide area network.
- In the interest of an inclusive information society maximise opportunities of accessibility to information and information technology by providing electronic information points at all local authority service outlet including local service centres, libraries, fire stations and tourist offices.
- Develop an intranet website with a view to exploring opportunities for selling corporate services and for dealing with service enquiries made by citizens.
- Move towards the concept of a 'paperless office' through the use of information technology tools such as e-mail, electronic fax, scheduler and the purchase of a document management system which will essentially act as an electronic filing system.
- Provide adequate relevant and ongoing training for both staff and members of the local authority thereby encouraging an ethos of 'lifelong learning' in a rapidly changing environment.
- Examine opportunities for teleworking in order to increase flexibility and responsiveness.
- Use information technology to respond to the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act.
- Work closely with the Local Government Computer Services Board to ensure compatibility with development in the IT area generally.
- Take on board and act upon recommendations emanating from the Information Society Commission established by Central Government.
- Establish a multi media centre in Navan as a practical training ground for all sections of society. It is hoped to expand this concept to other areas during the life of this plan.

OBJECTIVE FOUR

To match organisation and human resource development to a changing environment in which flexibility and responsiveness are imperative

STRATEGIES

- To ensure that human resource development and training are matched with organisational development.
- To make the necessary changes in organisational structure which facilitate a more responsive client orientated approach.
- To recognise people as a key resource fundamental to the delivery of change.
- To maximise opportunities for delegation of responsibility to promote job satisfaction and promote greater flexibility in responsiveness.

ACTIONS

- Complete within six months a detailed human resource development and training needs analysis consistent with organisational change and the need to respond to the changing environment.
- We will systematically increase the training budget to a level consistent with training needs.
- Continue the ongoing IT training plan in order to improve peoples capabilities and to turn information into useful knowledge.
- Continue to use information technology to remove routine tasks that detract from job satisfaction.
- Examine opportunities for teleworking in order to increase flexibility and allow selected staff greater opportunity to balance work and leisure time.
- Implement and reward a Staff Suggestion Scheme open to all staff members.
- Encourage staff at all levels to become actively involved in the monitoring and review of this plan.
- To continue to use the intranet and structured staff meetings to improve internal communications between functional departments.
- Ensure greater mobility of staff within and between departments as a means of multi-skilling promoting flexibility and job satisfaction.
- Develop and implement a Staff Assistant Programme.
- In the context of new structures and processes which emerge to encourage the concept of team based working.
- Prepare a Comprehensive Staff Handbook on Human Resource Issues.

OBJECTIVE FIVE

To play a lead role in the economic development of County Meath

STRATEGIES

- Ensure that the benefits of economic growth are evenly distributed throughout the county.
- Provide the necessary support and structures for the growth and expansion of the agricultural, industrial and tourism sectors.
- Ensure that the Council's planning administration and control system is flexible and robust enough to deal with the challenges and opportunities presented.
- Pursue through the Regional Planning Framework policies and opportunities for the betterment of County Meath.

ACTIONS

- Conduct a comprehensive review of the Development Plans in East Meath.
- Review the remaining Development Plans of South Meath with a view to ensuring the balanced development of these towns with particular reference to guarding against their becoming purely commuter towns.
- Review the remainder of the Council's Development Plans with particular reference to supporting rural communities and counteracting rural depopulation.
- Continue to assist in the promotion of Trim and Kells as Heritage Towns.
- Prepare an Action Plan for the future development of Donore which will allow it capitalise on the world-wide attraction of the Nru na Boinne Interpretative Centre.
- Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the planning administration system as follows:
 - Provide advance consultation of the review of Development Plans.
 - Complete a corporate geographic information system to assist in the planning decision process.
 - Provide for the scanning of all planning files to facilitate easy retrieval and viewing at remote locations.
 - Encourage the submission of planning applications in electronic format.
 - To continue to provide regular planning clinics at all service centres.
 - Provide a new IT based planning file tracking system to speed up the decision making process.
- Put in place particular measures to counteract rural depopulation with particular reference to the Urban and Village Renewal Schemes, the elimination of dereliction and housing policy.
- Assist Meath County Tourism in preparing Tourism Development Plan for County Meath.
- Ensure through the actions contained under the infrastructural objective that infrastructural capacity is developed consistent with growth.
- Work closely with the IDA, County Enterprise Board and the business community to provide the necessary supports to existing industry and to help attract new industry. In particular the County Development Team will:
 - In conjunction with the IDA, County Enterprise Board and the business sector provide an Enterprise Centre in Navan.
 - Identify and pursue sources of EU assistance.
 - Continue to provide links within existing and prospective industry.
 - Develop and manage Council owned land for industrial and commercial purposes.
 - Continue to provide advice and assistance for those wishing to set up industry in County Meath.
 - Provide financial assistance to the Boyne Valley Promotional Company to help secure the objectives of the Boyne Valley Integrated Action Plan.
 - Actively participate in the preparation of the Regional Planning Guidelines.
 - Consult with our neighbouring local authorities in the context of regional planning.

OBJECTIVE SIX

To ensure that infrastructural investment facilitates the economic and social development of County Meath

STRATEGIES

- To plan and implement infrastructural improvements consistent with land use planning.
- To provide for the highest standards of design consistent with sustainable development.
- To work closely with the neighbouring local authorities to ensure that infrastructural planning is both complementary and consistent.
- To make the necessary improvements in consultation with the National Roads Authority in the County's Road Network necessary to promote the expansion of the productive sectors.

ACTIONS

- Complete the construction of the Northern Motorway Project.
- Complete the construction of the Navan Inner Relief Road.
- Plan, design and if feasible implement the upgrading of the N3 from Clonee to Dunshaughlin.
- Co-operate with Westmeath County Council to ensure that the necessary upgrading of the N4 from Kilcock to Kinegad is implemented.
- Plan and design the Navan Inner Relief Road Stage 2B from the Kells Road to the Athboy Road.
- Ensure that the link road between the N3 and the Kentstown Road is completed as development comes onstream.
- Plan and design in consultation with the NRA the Bypass Projects at Dunshaughlin, Kells, Ashbourne, Slane, Ratoath and Navan.
- Implement the 5 year Road Restoration Programme.
- Upgrade and improve roads to the East Coast notably the R150 from Duleek to Julianstown and County Roads 325 and 330.
- Upgrade County Road 502 from Ratoath to Rath Cross.
- In consultation with the NRA implement junction improvements on the N1.
- Upgrade the N52 e.g. Kells Mullingar and Kells Ardee.
- Improve the Trim-Kilcock and Trim-Carbury routes (tourism and commercial route).
- Continue the planned programme of restoration of Class 3 County Roads and secure additional funding in this regard on the foot of the recent Road Pavement Study.
- Complete the upgrading of the Trim-Dublin Road (R154) under the E.U. Co-Financed Scheme.
- Complete the upgrading of the Trim-Navan Road.
- Plan and design the Eastern Bypass at Trim.
- Secure the completion of the Ratoath and Ashbourne Inner Relief Roads as development of the subject lands is advanced.
- Complete a comprehensive audit of road signage in the County.
- Improve access to Sliabh na Calaigh. Complete the Navan and Trim Sewerage Schemes.
- Complete the Dunboyne/Clonee, Ashbourne and Dunshaughlin Sewerage Schemes.
- Extend the Sewerage Treatment Plant at Enfield.
- Finalise the design of the Dunshaughlin Sewerage Scheme and seek funding for its completion.
- Seek to progress the East Meath Drainage Scheme both north and south of the River Nanny.
- Complete the Trim Water Supply Scheme.
- Advance the design and if feasible, start the Regional Water Supply Scheme at Ballinter.
- Undertake a Rural Water Supply Audit.
- Advance the taking in charge of the remaining Group Schemes.

OBJECTIVE SEVEN

To help create and sustain a clean and healthy environment for present and future generations

STRATEGIES

- To incorporate the concept of sustainability and environmental considerations into all policy making.
- To promote public awareness of environmental issues.
- To implement policies aimed at the preservation and conservation of Meath's natural and manmade environment.

ACTIONS

- Plan and implement a Local Agenda 21 Process.
- Implement waste reduction, minimisation and recycling policies through:
 - Provision of Civic Amenity Sites in Navan, Trim and Kells.
 - Increasing the number of Bring Centres in County Meath.
- Create a Green Centre of Excellence in a population centre of 1,500 people including home composting, alternative weekly collection of recyclables and anti-litter measures.
- Continue to involve schools at all levels in waste minimisation, recycling and litter prevention.
- Provide recycling credits to communities who become actively engaged in recycling initiatives.
- Enforce the Regulations on waste packaging and farm plastics.
- Promote the polluter pays principle through a combination of landfill charges and the incorporation in waste collection permits of conditions which penalise producers of waste.
- Continue to provide a comprehensive pollution monitoring service in accordance with regulatory requirements and incorporating the precautionary principle.
- Carry out a Water Wastage Audit and prepare a Water Conservation Plan based on its findings.
- Implement the Urban Waste Water Directive through the provision of secondary treatment plants at required locations, notably Trim and Navan.
- Promote public awareness in environmental issues through the Local Agenda 21 Process, the Office of the Education Officer, regular newsletters and Freedom of Access to Information on the Environment.
- Review the Council's purchasing policy to ensure that recycled and environmentally friendly products are used where possible.
- Review office procedures in relation to printing and the use of office products in order to promote sustainability.
- Through planned management and monitoring to preservice surface and groundwater quality. In particular regard will be had to the Liffey, Boyne and Tolka Water Quality Management Plans.
- Plan for the improvement where necessary of water quality through measures contained under the infrastructure objective.
- Finalise a Coastal Zone Management Plan for the Laytown/Bettystown Coastline.
- Through the Council's Development Plans ensure the conservation of areas of scientific Interest and Natural Heritage Areas.
- Endeavour to ensure compliance with the Bathing Water Directive in the designated bathing areas of Laytown and Bettystown.
- Lobby central government for the introduction of Urban Renewal Schemes in Navan and Ashbourne.
- Ensure that energy conservation issues are addressed in the design of all public buildings and local authority housing schemes.
- Examine opportunities for the creation of Urban Forestry in towns within the Boyne Valley.
- Work closely with Meath County Tourism to promote sustainable tourism particularly in the development of tourism walkways in the Boyne Valley.
- Participate in consultation with the Department of the Environment and the Dublin Transportation Office in the promotion of sustainable development principles in transport planning.

OBJECTIVE EIGHT

To help create a social environment in which everyone can enjoy a meaningful and rewarding lifestyle

STRATEGIES

- To expand the availability of leisure and recreation outlets.
- To promote educational and cultural activities through the expansion and improvement of the public library service and the promotion of the Arts.
- To actively encourage and assist community involvement to promote social inclusion and counteract problems such as vandalism, crime and antisocial behaviour.
- To work closely with the other statutory and local development agencies in order to meet this objective.
- To implement the full range of housing policy options.

ACTIONS

- Provide new libraries in Duleek, Ashbourne and Laytown.
- Expand the range of library services to meet changing demand in such areas as the provision of audio tapes, cd's, videos, etc.
- Use information technology to expand the availability of the library service.
- Provide in association with the Department of the Environment an integrated sports facility including a new swimming pool at Windtown, Navan.
- Fully exploit the potential of the Boyne Valley in the context of recreation and leisure through partnership with the Boyne Valley Promotional Company.
- Conduct a resource audit in all communities to determine the adequacy of community facilities.
- In the context of organisational development to examine the possibility of setting up a new division to deal exclusively with community development.
- Incorporate measures in this Plan under the Planning and Development Objective to counteract rural depopulation.
- Ensure that actions under the Infrastructure Objective of this Plan promote equally urban and rural development.
- Help put in place a Community Network to help with consultation on and resolution of community problems.
- Review the various community grants provided by the Council with a view to consolidating them and targeting areas of most need.
- Continue to promote and facilitate the concept of housing estate management in local authority housing estates.
- Set up a Garda Liaison Committee in accordance with Guidelines to issue from the Department of the Environment.
- Use the County Strategy Group and the Strategic Policy Committee as forums to help develop a partnership approach to the promotion of social inclusion.
- Plan and design housing schemes to facilitate social integration.
- Secure lands necessary for public housing and private site developments consistent with demand patterns.

OBJECTIVE NINE

To maximise resources available to Meath County Council and ensure that these resources are deployed in the most effective and efficient manner

STRATEGIES

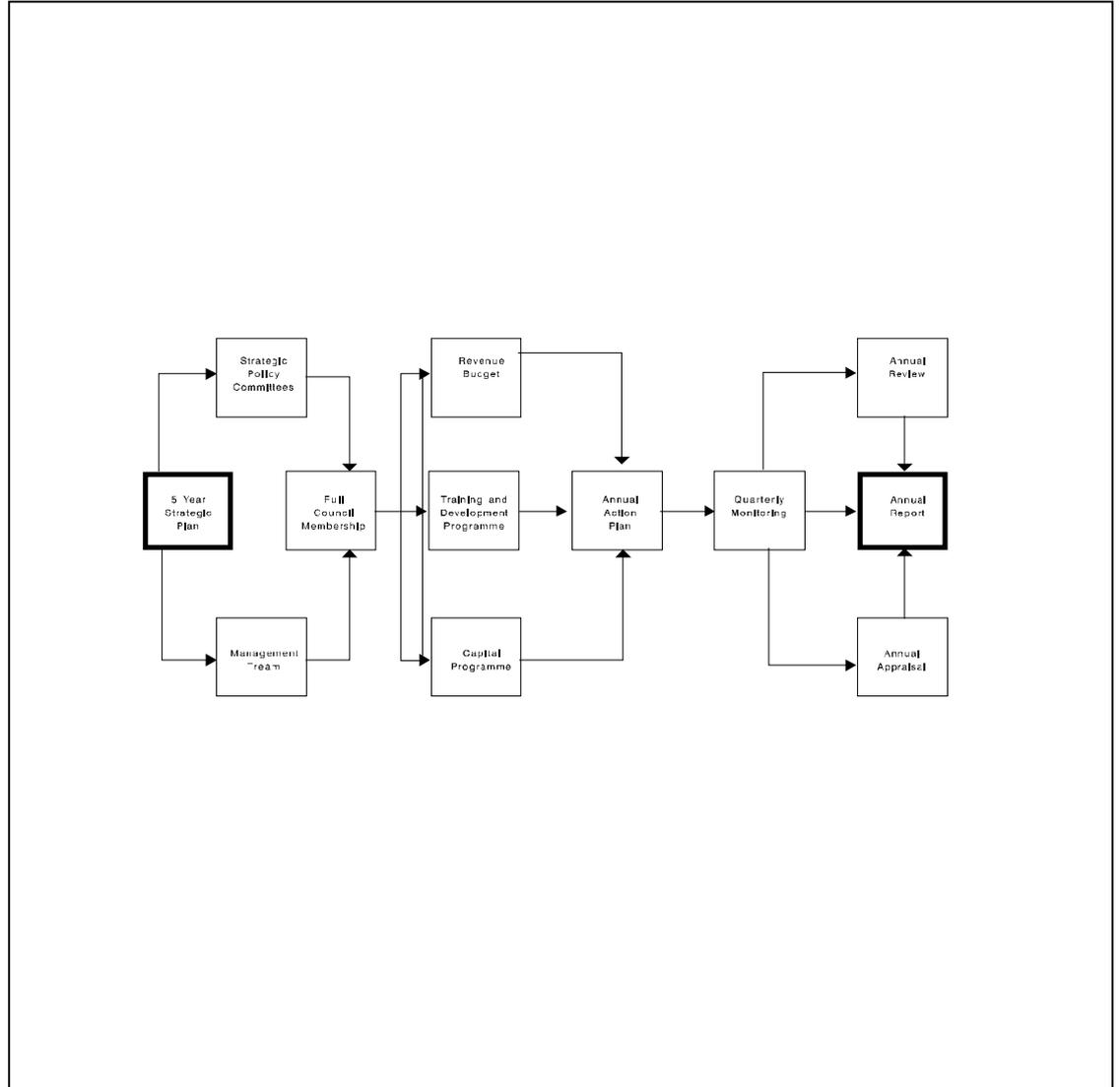
- Replace the current IT based financial accounting systems with a Corporate Financial Management System.
- Modernise existing income collection systems and identify additional sources of income where possible.
- Promote efficiency and value for money throughout the organisation.

ACTIONS

- Examine with the Financial Institutions the possibility of using A.T.M. facilities for payment of local authority accounts.
- Implement the prompt payments of Accounts Act 1997.
- Identify additional source of income, locally, nationally and particularly at E.U. level.
- Work with the Department of the Environment on the introduction of an Accrual Accounting System.
- Prepare for the necessary adjustments arising out of the move to a Single E.U. Currency.
- Fundamentally re-examine the Council's purchasing policy with a view to re-defining the present Stores operation.
- Continue to review the Machinery Expense Account with a view to ensuring the appropriate balance between purchase and hire of plant.
- Incorporate into the Final Accounts a review of performance in the context of value for money studies prepared for local authorities in order to address compliance issues.
- Introduce a comprehensive organisation wide Cash Management Policy.
- In conjunction with the introduction of an accrual accounting system source with the help of the LGCSB an appropriate IT based Financial Management System.
- Actively promote the concept of devolved budgets to promote accountability and expenditure control.
- Develop the present financial checking system into a proper internal audit system.
- Devise a comprehensive Asset Management System incorporating Rolling Maintenance Programmes and with particular reference to the management of the Council's landbank.
- Participate in the Quality Initiative Programme administered by the N.S.A.I.
- Introduce financial performance indicators where appropriate.
- Provide training for staff and members appropriate to the financial management discipline.

ANNEX 3

MEATH COUNTY COUNCIL STRATEGIC PLAN: Implementation, Monitoring and Review Process



Full functions to be decentralised to District Offices include: Expenditure Control, Public Lighting, Hedge Cutting, Road Opening Licences, Representations and Complaints, Road Drainage Notices, Road Works Programme, Local Improvement Schemes, Urban Renewal Works, Water Connections, Housing Maintenance and Motor Tax.

In addition the following functions will be dealt with at District Level:

ACTIVITY	Take Application for Referral	Process for Referral	Monitor for Referral	Account Queries Statements	Take Payments
Land Acquisition (Roads)					
Grant Claims					
Payments					
Wages					
Weighbridges					
Loans					
Rents and Rates					
Other Payments					
HEGs					
Register of Electors					
Public Liability Claims					
Casual Trading					
Wayleave Acquisition					
Illegal Dumping					
Well Applications					
Subsidy Applications					
Derelict Sites					
Planning Reports – Applications					
Housing Maintenance					
Housing Applications					
Essential Repair Grants					
Disabled Persons Grants					
Mortgage Allowance					
Improvement Works in Lieu					
Wages Sheets					
Planning Enforcement					
Building Control					
Applications – Grants Schemes					

Source: McLoughlin 1998