

Improving the Delivery of Quality Public Services

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Aim of the Report

The aim of this report is to make practical proposals to enhance our public services on which we invest €39 billion per annum. Its focus is on putting the citizen at the centre of public services reform – a goal being actively pursued across many OECD countries. It proposes a new ‘*Public Value*’ approach for transforming public services which concentrates on ensuring equity and fairness in service provision and improving service outcomes. The vision is for an adaptive and high-performance public service responding creatively to the challenges of our rapidly changing society. The achievement of high-quality public services will underpin our future social, economic and environmental development, making Ireland an even more attractive place to live, work and invest.

The report recognises that public services are not only of interest to those that use them at any one point in time, but also to potential users and the public at large as taxpayers. Services such as health, education, training, transport, arts/ culture/ sports, and social protection help citizens to realise their potential and participate in economic, cultural and social life. Other services play a supportive role helping those people experiencing difficulties at a particular time such as with unemployment, homelessness, family breakdown etc.

This report is designed to assist in the implementation of public service reforms as outlined in the current social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* and the ‘*Lifecycle*’ approach to the future development of public services as advocated in the NESF’s report on the ‘*Developmental Welfare State*’.

Contextual Setting

Major improvements have been made here in the delivery of public services over the last decade, arising from reforms under the public service modernisation programme and successive partnership agreements. These achievements are recognised and built upon in the report. Many individual examples of best practice and innovation are highlighted. The commitment of staff working in the public service to helping the public is cited as a major strength. Notwithstanding the progress made, significant shortcomings remain, particularly in relation to resolving more complex social problems. There are also pressures arising from meeting new and emerging challenges

in our rapidly changing society. These result from our high economic growth, significant population growth (318,000 over the last four years), demographic and social changes, inward migration and greater cultural diversity (nearly 10% of our population are now non-nationals).

As in other countries, there are rising expectations from citizens for more choice, higher quality standards and value for money. At the same time, the public may be unwilling to pay additional taxes to fund public services. This highlights the need for service providers to be able to demonstrate the value of their services to citizens (customers/users) on an ongoing basis.

Approach

The Project Team¹ was chaired by Mr Kevin Murphy, former Ombudsman and Information Commissioner. It was comprised of representatives from the Oireachtas, IBEC, ICTU, farming bodies, C&V sector, government departments and local government. The Team had particular regard in their work for those who are marginalised and disadvantaged in our society and the equality, social inclusion and rural/urban dimensions. For the purposes of the report, the following definition of quality was used: *'the extent to which service delivery and / or service outcomes meet with the informed expectations and the defined needs of the customer'*.

Many individuals and organisations contributed to the report through written submissions and presentations made to the Project Team. To ensure that there was an emphasis on practical solutions; focus group research work was undertaken on Services for Homeless People in Dublin and Care Services for Older People in Co. Westmeath. The report drew upon experiences across OECD countries and a substantial amount of policy review work undertaken here and abroad.

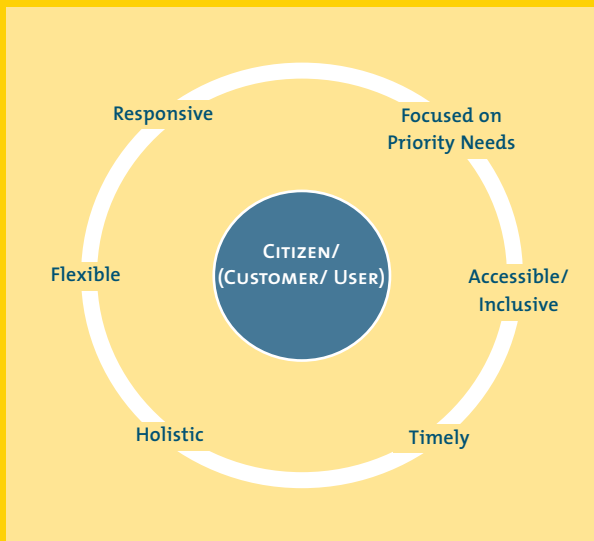
A Plenary held in the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, provided an opportunity for over 200 people to comment and input their views on the report before its finalisation.

1. Membership listed on page 14

Main Thrust of the Report

A central issue is how we can move from our present system, which often tries to fit complex individual needs into a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, towards one where services are 'wrapped around' people's needs and circumstances. Most of us, at different stages of the 'life-cycle' will require a wide range of public services to meet our needs. This is particularly true for individuals at crucial 'transition points', for example when a child with special-needs starts school, when a troubled teenager drops out of school, when an elderly parent living independently has an accident etc. These are crucial 'transition points', which can become 'turning points'. If the right services and supports are delivered at the right time a person can go on to live a healthy and productive life. If not, their situation can worsen requiring more expensive and complex interventions in the longer-term. The delivery of services to match people's needs more closely will, over time, result in improved outcomes for the individual and better value for the State. The figure below outlines the main features of a more customer/user centred approach to the design and delivery of quality public services.

Figure 1 Customer/ User Centered Public Services



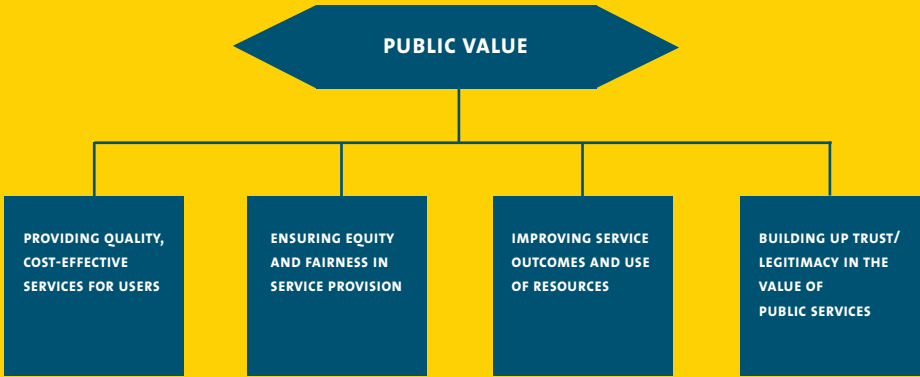
A main finding of the report is that there can often be a wide gap between what service providers believe they are providing and the services that users require. A focus by service providers on how people actually experience services by '*mapping the customer/user journey*' will help to improve service design and foster innovation. Customer feedback can be used to reduce unnecessary complexity and bureaucracy of service provision. However, such user consultation models are used unevenly here at present. Good examples are those developed by the Simon Communities of Ireland, the Carers Association and the Consumer Panels of the Health Service Executive. User consultation models can also be used to develop a hierarchy of needs within the '*life cycle*' approach adopted in *Towards 2016*. For example there is a hierarchy of needs in the case of the elderly for better health care, transport, home help, social services, housing etc, ranging from those who wish to live independently at home to those who require residential care. Identifying priority areas and addressing the needs of people in a holistic way within the '*life cycle*' approach would provide a focus for the various service providers.

Given the high level of immigration here in recent years, our public services have a vital role to play in supporting the inclusion of new communities. An intercultural approach based upon the principals of equality and respect should increasingly inform the design and delivery of public services. More culturally sensitive and accessible services will benefit people from minority groups as well as other vulnerable groups.

Creating 'Public Value'

The 'Public Value' approach, proposed by the Project Team, puts the citizen at the centre of public service reforms. Its focus is on achieving improved service outcomes and building up trust and legitimacy in the value of public services. It recognises that public services are not just of interest to those using them at any one point in time, but to all citizens – not just because as taxpayers they fund services, but also because people often value those services received by others as well as themselves. The key components resulting in the generation of public value are outlined in the figure overleaf.

Figure 2 Creating Public Value



These components are mutually reinforcing in generating maximum public value. The Public Value approach responds to citizen/user preferences and recognises a ‘*value based*’ rationale for interventions as well as the more conventional ‘*market failure*’ rationale. It provides an overarching framework to determine priorities for service delivery and resource allocation.

There is much scope for improving outcomes by involving the public in the co-production of public services. Examples are where people are involved in waste recycling and environmental conservation; improving their own health through better diet and lifestyle choices; and are investing more in their own and their children’s education etc. Other examples are where people are consulted on the planning and design of housing estates and public spaces, helping to create more attractive and safer streets, parks and open spaces. Changing our own culture and taking responsibility for our behaviour (such as with road and workplace safety and anti-social behaviour) can also do much to improve public service outcomes.

Main Findings of the Report

An integrated '*Whole-of-Government*' approach is required to address the complex social problems that many people face nowadays (the recent National Disability Strategy is an example of how well this can be done). Given our rapid demographic and societal change we need to plan ahead to ensure that schools, transport, health care, community services and related infrastructure will be in place as communities need them. The Adamstown Strategic Development Zone approach in Co. Dublin is an innovative example of this, as is the Donegal Integrated Services Project. A '*mapping*' of public service provision at regional and local levels, against future demands arising from demographic trends would greatly aid service planning. Such a '*mapping*' exercise would also help to identify inequality in access and provision of services, such as where general medical practices in Dublin tend to be concentrated in wealthier areas with poorer areas less well served.

A medium-term perspective, for the planning, funding and provision of public services is required to tackle key policy issues on a long-term basis. The focus should be on early intervention/prevention to avoid problems becoming more chronic and costly to address in the longer term. For example, there are long waiting lists for children requiring educational, psychological and other therapeutic services resulting in them receiving help much later than required (an earlier NESF analysis showed that there was a return of €7 for every €1 invested in early childhood care and education). This approach can be applied across a wide range of public service areas. The planned roll-out of the Garda vetting system for all staff who work with/or care for children and vulnerable adults should be expedited as a matter of urgency.

A main consideration is that we must achieve the best possible outcomes from any given level of resources made available. A stronger '*evaluation culture*' is needed to determine how well services are working and that policies are put in place that '*get to the heart of a problem*'. This would provide a more objective basis for the prioritising of funding towards areas of greatest need and support the mainstreaming of new learning and best practice into existing and new policies. Consistent performance indicators are needed to measure the impact of public spending in achieving key policy targets and objectives.

The Report highlights the scope for improved linkages between policy-making at national level and local service delivery. It calls for a more '*collaborative*' and '*networked*' form of governance with central government setting the overall

strategic priorities, while local service providers are given greater autonomy and flexibility to innovate and adapt their services. Effective mechanisms for the coordination of public services delivery are needed to provide the '*joined-up*' continuum of services on the ground. A single 'lead agency' in each sector (i.e. older people living alone, early school leavers etc) would be responsible for the overall design and coordination of services. Other providers in the service network would be required to collaborate with the lead agency. This partnership approach must be rewarded and become an integral part of each organisations strategic and business planning process. In the first place it will be important to streamline services and the number of agencies involved.

A '*case management*' approach can help to improve services delivery especially for more vulnerable clients. Examples of innovative approaches are those of the Money Advice & Budgeting Service, the Local Employment Service Network and the Homeless Agency. Vulnerable people may not complain about poor services, afraid that they might lose them altogether. Several advocacy models which assist vulnerable people to access services may be highlighted such as those of the Citizens Information Board, Alzheimer's Society of Ireland and the Community Links Workers Model in Co. Westmeath.

Significant progress has been made across the public sector in improving the quality of customer service. However, there are still many providers of public services who do not come under the current Quality Customer Service Initiative. All service providers should set out agreed standards of service that citizens can expect to receive as well as their obligations and responsibilities in availing of them. The customer voice is essential in transforming public services. The measurement of user satisfaction with the outcomes of services should be monitored and reported upon. The *Canadian Common Measurements Tool* is an innovative example of a process for measuring customer satisfaction to drive forward continuous improvements. The development here of an agreed evaluation framework (such as the Common Assessment Framework model used across EU countries) could support improvements in the performance of public service providers.

The issue of redress is linked to the need for clear standards of service. In many cases a timely apology or an explanation for a decision can be sufficient for an aggrieved person. Specific reference to redress for users who feel that they have a legitimate complaint about the service they have received or been refused, needs to be reinstated in the QCS principles.

The Community and Voluntary (C&V) sector plays a valuable role in the delivery of public services. For example, they deliver over €1 billion of the annual health budget. Over time, higher standards have been set for all providers of public services resulting in increased professional services standards. A balance is now needed between ensuring accountability by the C&V sector in the use of public money on the one hand and the responsiveness of the services it provides on the other.

Information and Communication Technology offers new opportunities to tackle problems of exclusion in our society by offsetting barriers associated with remoteness and restricted mobility. It has transformed service delivery for transaction e-government services such as the payment of motor tax, revenue and passports etc. Innovative examples of websites which provide public services information include the new Citizens Information Boards website at a national level and South Dublin County Council '*Connect Service*' website at a local level. At the same time policy initiatives are needed to help those on the wrong side of the '*digital divide*'.

The commitment and capability of staff working in government departments and with service providers is central to the successful implementation of public service reforms. Underpinning all reforms is the need for a culture and ethos among staff which sees citizen/customer centred services as the way forward. This is particularly relevant for those services which must be provided on a 24 hour basis. A partnership approach is essential as well as strong leadership and vision at a senior level. New skills and competencies need to be developed on an ongoing basis. The ongoing change management programme within the Civil Service and wider public service is an important vehicle for the development of new set of skill competencies and ways of working.

The diagram overleaf sets out in summary form what the Project Team considered to be the main elements in an overall strategy for the delivery of quality public services. Implementing this will require a medium term action plan and this is considered in the recommendations that follow.

Figure 3 Elements In An Overall Strategy



Recommendations

The report contains eight practical recommendations which the Project Team believe will enrich the ongoing public service reform programme and advance progress towards the new social policy '*Lifecycle Framework*' perspective outlined in *Towards 2016*.

1) A New Public Value Approach for Delivering Quality Public Services

A New '*Public Value*' approach for delivering high-quality, cost-effective public services is proposed. The focus is on putting the citizen at the centre of reforms by providing quality services that reflect citizen (customer/user) preferences; ensuring equity/fairness in service provision, improving service outcomes and building up trust and legitimacy in the value of services. There are four main elements within this approach:

- Designing/ planning services around citizens (customer/user) needs;
- Prioritising resources on early intervention/prevention;
- Integrating service provision and providing multi-annual funding;
- Establishing quality standards for services and reporting on their outcomes.

Overarching principles of equality, fairness, transparency, cost-effectiveness, accountability and evaluation must form the ethos and way of working for all public service providers. A stronger '*evaluation culture*' would ensure that the substantial investment made in public services achieves the best possible outcomes for citizens, communities and society. A '*whole-of-government*' approach is needed to address more complex social issues with central government setting the overall strategic priorities, while local service providers, working together in a service network, are given greater autonomy and flexibility to innovate and adapt their services.

Each government department could implement this approach for those services under their remit within the '*Lifecycle Framework*' outlined in *Towards 2016*. The Template below outlines the main elements of this new approach.

Figure 4. A New Approach For Delivering Quality Public Services



2) A Medium-Term Perspective for the Planning, Funding & Provision of Services

A medium-term perspective for the planning, funding and provision of public services should be further developed by the Department of Finance in conjunction with other relevant bodies, to tackle key policy issues on a longer-term basis. This could build on the new *National Development Plan 2007-2013*; the current five-year plan for infrastructure; and the 10 year perspective of *Towards 2016*.

3) Promote Greater Innovation and Experimentation

The Department of Finance should select some specific bodies, (preferably in the health and education sectors), which would be allowed greater freedom and flexibility on a pilot basis for funding and other resources to innovate and experiment. The learning from these pilots would help determine how the design and delivery of services more generally can be improved. This scope for more freedom and flexibility should be balanced by commitments in relation to outputs and desired outcomes.

4) Improve Quality Customer Service Standards

All service providers should provide clear information on the entitlements and rights as well as obligations and responsibilities of those people who wish to avail of their service. The agreed standard of service that citizens can expect to receive should be clearly set out and service outcomes monitored and reported upon. Findings should be made available to the public and be open to independent verification. A new *'Quality Service Standard Initiative'* incorporating the above principles should be introduced for those service providers who do not come under the current Quality Customer Service Initiative.

5) Improve the Design and Coordination of Public Services

To provide the joined-up services that people need on the ground, responsibility for the design and coordination of services in a specific sector should be given to a lead agency (such as for young unemployed adults, older people living alone, early school leaving etc). Other agencies in that sector would be obliged to co-operate with the lead agency and incentives to achieve this put in place. Departments could jointly identify areas where there is most scope for this initiative in the context of the *'Lifecycle Framework'* outlined in *Towards 2016*. A key need will be to build up the necessary value system and ethos of a partnership approach for working together.

6) Adopt a Case Management Approach For More Vulnerable Clients

A '*Case Management*' approach should become part of the way service providers identify and meet the needs of their more vulnerable clients. This would include the use of an '*advocate*' to work with an individual and help them get the service they need. Each Department should identify specific areas which would be appropriate for this approach, for services under their remit which could be introduced on a phased basis. A '*Case Management Fund*' should be set up for particular sectors and service providers invited to bid for financial assistance on the basis of innovative and cost-effective approaches.

7) Strengthen Relationship between the State Sector and the Community & Voluntary Sector

Given the valuable contribution made by the C&V Sector in many sectors, a supportive Policy Framework document to strengthen and develop their relationship with the State sector should be agreed. This would include achieving a balance between State regulation and accountability of C&V bodies while providing them with the autonomy and flexibility required to deliver quality services. This framework document could be complemented with sectoral agreements at local level.

8) Establish a Standing High-Level Committee on Public Services

A '*Standing High-Level Committee on Public Services*' should be established, representative of relevant stakeholders, with a clear mandate from Government to drive forward a programme for the improvement of public services. Its functions would include:

- Progressing reform proposals within the context of the '*Lifecycle Framework*'.
- Reviewing the range of advisory groups in operation and any proposals to set up new groups to ensure coherence.
- Progressing developments in key areas e.g. resources, autonomy/accountability, evaluation and standards.
- Promoting and encouraging innovation and experimentation.

- Ensuring that important issues relating to public services are taken on board and that serious issues are not lost sight of.
- Ensuring that appropriate complaints and redress procedures are in place.
- Proposing the setting up of action groups in key policy areas.

Project Team Members

CHAIRPERSON Kevin Murphy

STRAND ONE

Deputy John Curran T.D. Fianna Fáil

Deputy Willie Penrose T.D. Labour

Deputy Paul Kehoe T.D. Fine Gael

STRAND TWO

Fergal O'Brien Irish Business and Employers' Confederation

Bernard Harbor Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Michael Doody Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers' Association

STRAND THREE

Audry Deane Society of St Vincent de Paul

Dr Fergus O'Ferrall The Wheel

PJ Cleere Disability Federation of Ireland

STRAND FOUR

Constance Hanniffy Association of County and City Councils

Joe Horan South Dublin County Council

Áine Stapleton Department of Finance

Ger Crowley Health Service Executive

Professor Miriam Wiley Economic and Social Research Institute

John Shaw Department of the Taoiseach

NESF Secretariat **Gerard Walker**

National Economic and Social Forum
An Fóram Náisiúnta
Eacnamaíoch agus Sóisialach

16 Parnell Square, Dublin 1, Ireland
T 353.1.814 63 61 F 353.1.814 63 01
LOCAL 1890.203 006 E info@nesf.ie W www.nesf.ie