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Improving customer orientation through service charters

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What is a (Citizen's) Service Charter?

A service charter is a public document that sets out the standards of service that clients can expect from an organisation, as well as avenues for taking complaints. Service charters are intended to ensure that organisations:

- ◆ Focus on clients
- ◆ Manage the expectations of clients
- ◆ Measure and assess performance
- ◆ **Initiate performance improvement**

What are the key elements of a Charter?

- ◆ **Standards:** Commitments on the level and quality of service to which users are entitled.
- ◆ **Information:** Clarity about who is eligible, when and where the service is available, any pre-requisites (e.g. papers to bring with you)
- ◆ **Redress:** How to complain and what redress to expect in the case the service deliverer falls short of the standards it promises



Experiences with Citizen's Charters in the UK

Context

- ◆ **Citizen's Charters originated at local level (Harlow and York) and in Inland Revenue in the late 1980s**
- ◆ **Motivation for Major to introduce charters for ALL public services in 1992: Decreasing levels of quality in spite of national standards in many service areas**
- ◆ **„People who depend on public services – patients, passengers, parents, pupils, benefit claimants – all must know where they stand and what service they have a right to expect“ (John Major)**
- ◆ **By 1997, there were over 40 charters for Ministries and over 10,000 local charters (including for NGOs)**

Assessment of the first generation of citizen's charters

- ◆ Charter standards often too vague to be meaningful
- ◆ Standards were largely devised purely internally without consulting with the full range of stakeholders
- ◆ In-spite of the committment to ,non-discrimination' there was little regard to the needs of those who do not use the services, such as ethnic minorities
- ◆ The ,customer' rhetoric of citizen's charters sometimes created a ,money-back' mentality and even misuse of financial redress

The role of service charters in the Blair government

- ◆ **The Labour government of Tony Blair claimed ‘ownership of the charter idea’ and relaunched it in 1998 under the new label ‘Service First’ but eventually dismissed the programme and integrated the ‘customer service’ idea into the Charter Mark Programme.**
- ◆ **Charters still play an important role for public transport, education, hospitals and housing but they are now voluntary.**

The Charter Mark Programme as an external certification of service quality

- ♦ **Established in 1992**
- ♦ **All public sector organisation can apply for external certification either for the whole organisation or for particular units within it**
- ♦ **Charter Mark badge is awarded for 3 years**
- ♦ **Until 2002 applicants could apply for a subsidy which covered the largest part of the evaluation costs (ca. £ 700 dependent on size of organisation)**

The evolution of the Charter Mark Programme

- ◆ In 2003 and at present revision of assessment criteria
- ◆ Lately the Charter Mark Programme is marketed not just as an external recognition but as an improvement tool (see the self-assessment tool at <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/chartermark/>)
- ◆ The Charter Mark Unit is part of the Office for Public Services Reform in the Cabinet Office
- ◆ Evaluations are carried out by four independent external bodies accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service

Latest developments in the UK

- **There is now recognition that there is a need to consult with
a) actual users b) potential users c) the community at large**
- **Users are not only seen in their (passive) role as ‘receiving’ customers but also as active co-producers who have an important role in improving the quality of public services**
- **In some areas, commitments have become legal entitlements, in particular in health (e.g. patients are guaranteed treatment at an alternative hospital if they have waited more than a specific period for a specific treatment)**



Types of Services Charters

Charters exist for different stakeholders

- 1. Taxpayer's Charters**
- 2. Employer's Charters**
- 3. Jobseeker's Charter**
- 4. Charter for Court Users**
- 5. Victim's Charter**
- 6. Parent's Charter**
- 7. Patient's Charter**
- 8. Road User's Charter**
- 9. Tenant's Charter**
- 10. ...**

Charters exist not only for individuals but also for communities

Smoke-Free Bristol Charter

We recognise that smoking is the number one cause of preventable death in Bristol and across the United Kingdom.

We recognise that most smokers become smokers before they become adults, and that many begin before their thirteenth birthdays. The future health of our children depends on ensuring that they do not become smokers.

We also recognise that progress to tackle health inequalities and increase the life expectancy of poorer and more vulnerable people in our community depends on action to cut the number of smokers and reduce the harm that smoking causes to them and to others.

We cannot tolerate the terrible toll of death, illness and misery that smoking causes to the people of Bristol. We promise to do all we can to bring it to an end.

Smoke-Free Bristol Charter

We, The Bristol Partnership, are therefore determined

- **To reduce smoking prevalence in our area**
- **To educate and inform local people about the dangers of smoking and secondhand smoke**
- **To encourage and support smokers who want to give up, and to promote local support to stop services**
- **To protect non-smokers from the damaging effects of secondhand smoke**
- **To support the enforcement of the law on advertising and the sale of tobacco products to minors**

We believe that protecting and improving the health and safety of local people is a top priority for the Partnership. We must work together taking determined action to protect the public from the damage caused by smoking.

We commit ourselves to working towards becoming a smokefree city.

Example of a Service Charters: The Taxpayers Charter of 1986

One-page document consisting of six principles:

- 3. Help and Information**
- 4. Courtesy and Consideration**
- 5. Fairness**
- 6. Privacy and Confidentiality**
- 7. Costs of Compliance**
- 8. Independent Appeal and Review**

Example of a current service charter:

- The repair charter of a housing agency for tenants -**

This leaflet is our promise of how we will respond when you ask for a repair. We know that repairing your home is one of our most important services.

Our promise:

Repairs will be completed quickly; they will be good value for money; they will last; and the work will be done in one visit if possible.

Source: Carrick Housing, www.carrickhousing@org.uk, accessed on 15 March 2006

- The repair charter of a housing agency for tenants -

This leaflet includes:

- the repair completion times for over 100 repairs**
- ordering repairs;**
- appointments and inspections;**
- quality standards and decorations;**
- choice and upgrades; and**
- support for all tenants and disabled adaptations.**

Example of a current service charter:
**- The parents charter of North Lanarkshire
Council Department of Education -**

This charter outlines

- **what you as a parent can normally expect from the authority,**
- **how you can help and**
- **how you can raise any concerns you may have.**

Source:

**<http://www.northlan.gov.uk/education+and+learning/education+services/parental+information/pai>
, accessed on 15 March 2006**

Parents charter – as a parent, what you can expect?

- ♦ a free school place;
- ♦ a choice of school within certain limits;
- ♦ school premises which meet health and safety and public health requirements;
- ♦ a part-time nursery place for all four year old children;
- ♦ a part-time nursery place for most three year old children and for all by 2002;
- ♦ a nursery place for children under three according to need;
- ♦ the choice of a nursery place at a council nursery or at an approved independent or voluntary nursery;
- ♦ your child taught by suitably qualified staff;
- ♦ information about your child's progress;
- ♦ an opportunity to appeal if things go wrong;
- ♦ assessment and help with special educational needs;
- ♦ in most circumstances, access to records which the school keeps about your child;
- ♦ religious and moral education for your child (you can withdraw your child from this if you wish);
- ♦ information about education and schools in your area;
- ♦ a vote and the right to stand for election to the school board;
- ♦ information from the school board about its activities;
- ♦ pupil education at P1, P2 and P3 in a class of no more than 30 pupils;
- ♦ up to a maximum of 25 hours class contact time per normal school week for pupils in primary schools and a maximum of 27.5 hours class contact time per normal school week for pupils in secondary school.

Parents charter - what if things go wrong?

Like any large organisation things can go wrong from time to time.

- ♦ When this happens, it is best to deal with the problem as soon as possible. The Department of Education is committed to working with parents so you should feel confident about approaching the school.
- ♦ Your first contact when things go wrong should be the school's head teacher. You may then if appropriate have the opportunity to discuss the problem with your child's teacher. In the majority of cases difficulties can be resolved at school level.
- ♦ In some cases, a difficulty may merit you contacting the Department of Education. If you do, you should have the opportunity of speaking to one of our officers who is knowledgeable about your school.
- ♦ Whoever you contact you can expect to be treated seriously, speedily, sympathetically and with respect.
- ♦ If you do require to contact the education department you will, if writing to us, usually receive acknowledgement of your letter within ten working days. This will inform you of the steps we are taking to provide you with a more detailed response. In all written correspondence we will use language that is easy to understand and will include a contact name and telephone number.
- ♦ If contacting the department by telephone, we will answer your call promptly, giving a name so that you know who you are talking to. A standard complaints procedure exists for all departments within the authority. Copies of this are available in school or from the Education Department.

Parents charter - How can you help?

- ♦ Attendance at school is vital. You have a legal duty to ensure your child receives a suitable education.
- ♦ As a parent you can help your child by –
- ♦ making sure your child attends school regularly;
- ♦ encouraging and supporting your child with any homework given;
- ♦ showing that you are interested in how your child is getting on at school;
- ♦ encouraging your child to respect the school and the whole school community;
- ♦ talking to the school about any problems your child may have, attending parents' meetings,
- ♦ supporting the work of the school board, P.T.A. or P.A. and considering being a member of these.



**What can we learn
from European
experiences with
service charters?**

Strengths and weaknesses of service charters

- **Low and falling levels of public service quality have in many cases led to a lack of confidence of the public in the reality of charters.**
- **Yet charters have prompted some service providers to make improvements, in particular when they are developed in consultation with staff, users and other government agencies.**
- **Politicians now find it more difficult to make unrealistic promises to the public.**
- **Charters have stimulated the debate about the right of redress of consumers and citizens in relation to public (and privatised) services**

Key success factors for the implementation of service charters

- ◆ Start with organisations/units which have a lot of contact with external customers, then extend service charters to units/organisations with internal customers.
- ◆ While a common framework is useful, the commitments built into the service charters should result from consultation with (actual and potential) users, the community at large and front-line staff.
- ◆ Service charters without a solid performance measurement system are useless.
- ◆ Agencies must be given incentives to use the service charters as a tool to improve performance (external recognition and external evaluation).
- ◆ The principles and standards contained in a charter must be monitored and evaluated on a continuous basis (e.g. surveys with staff and customers)