

Innovation for Good Local and Regional Governance – A European Challenge

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Paper 3:

The role of citizen charters in provoking a customer-driven delivery of public services in the framework of an effective incentive system. The importance of participation by customers/citizens.

By Frank Faber

1. Introduction

Participation of citizens is at the very heart of the idea of democracy. Besides electoral participation also in the fields of policy making and public service delivery citizen participation can be practised. This paper is about public service delivery and citizen participation.

Central questions in this paper are:

1. How can citizen charters successfully contribute to improving the quality of individual public services?
2. Which role citizen participation has to play in creating an effective incentive system which is the driving force behind the citizen charter?

This paper argues out that better quality of public services could be obtained by a series of measures:

- Developing in a public organisation a willingness to listen to citizens/customers and getting a clear picture of their needs and expectations about the deliverance of (individual) public services.
- Therefore organising qualitative research with the participation of citizens in e.g focus groups and providing feedback to the participants of sessions in focus groups;
- Being transparent: the listening attitude could be given expression by communicating openly customer driven service standards in the field of individual public services.
- Transparent communicating of service standards opens the way to give citizens/customers a special role of an external incentive for public administrations to perform better. A citizen

charter provides the framework to embed in the organisation an ongoing incentive 'to say what you do and to do what you say'.

It sounds reasonable that implementing customer driven service standards in the framework of a citizen charter contributes effectively to democratic participation for citizens/customers. This occurs in the field of individual service delivery which is a form of policy implementation, a priority for many governments at this moment e.g. the Dutch government. This could be a good justification for giving more attention to a proper implementation of citizen charters.

2. Summary

- a. Once the UK took the first steps in 1991 in implementing Citizen Charters, this instrument became firmly established in most European countries. A citizen charter is an organisation's commitment to the customer about the quality of its services the customer can expect. This commitment gets form and content by openly communicating a set of service standards and apologize in some way when a service standard is not met. The principles of citizen charter are used in two ways in order to improve the quality of services: a) formal written citizen charters (Dutch/Irish model) whereby the service standards are the main form of expression; b) service standards which are incorporated in a quality mark (such as the Charter Mark of Customer Service Excellence Award in the UK), with a less clear communication of the service standards to the customer, but a strong focus on measuring the improvement in customer satisfaction and achieving the quality mark.
- b. Both approaches are based on service standards. The essence of both is the functioning of an external incentive. The incentives differ. With the English model the main incentive is in meeting the requirements of the assessment and acquiring the quality mark. The incentive of the Dutch/Irish model derives its strength from the transparent publication of the service standards, verifiable by the customer. Publication of service standards takes place preferably at the point where the service is provided. When a promise is not met, a so called compensation is put at the customers disposal. Both approaches demonstrably improve customer satisfaction and the quality of service, acknowledging the importance of user consultation. This is apparent both from Dutch research among customers and from the British research among managers and customers.
- c. A Europe-wide approach to the implementation of citizen charters has been developed (see the Practitioners Handbook "Seven Steps to a Citizen Charter with Service Standards"). It appears that there is a consensus about the essential elements which make a citizen charter into an effective incentive for improving the quality of public services (3 C's: customer driven service standards, transparent communication, control/compensation). There is an increasing awareness that customer insight is essential in making public services more customer-focused. The participation of customers/citizens (via such means as focus groups or in-depth interviews) is very helpful in obtaining customer insight and setting customer driven standards.

- d. The role of the customer in the formal written citizen charters is
 - 1) to verify the service standards
 - 2) to produce input used to establish customer driven service standards.

The role of the public service organization is

- 1) to provide possibilities for participation of customers in e.g. focus groups
- 2) to listen to customers, and
- 3) to be transparent in communicating the service standards.

Participation of customers and transparency of public organizations together make citizen charter effective.

- e. A citizen charter is as strong as the weakest link. A number of imperfections are lying in wait for (vague service standards, lack of transparency, poor registration of results). In that case a fruitful way to overcome imperfections is to stimulate customer participation in order to be better informed about the needs and expectations of customers. A focus group is an appropriate tool to gain information by fostering customer participation. This direct form of contact will foster the faith of the staff in the possibilities of the own organization. It motivates – is the experience - to perform better and – it is plausible – that customer participation fosters the confidence of citizens in the democracy.
- f. Citizen charters are functioning in the field of individual public service delivery which is a form of policy implementation, a priority for many governments at this moment e.g. the Dutch government. This could be a good justification for giving more attention to a proper implementation of citizen charters.

3. What is a citizen charter ?

The principles originally pioneered in the UK are now used extensively around the world, not only in Europe and countries such as Australia and New Zealand but, more recently, in developing economies (India, Mexico, Nigeria, Hungary, South Africa, etc.). The application of citizen charters differs depending on the type of country. In this article the focus will be given to the European countries.

The key aspect of a citizen charter is an organisation's commitment to the customer about the quality of its services the customer can expect. A citizen charter essentially consists of the 3 C's: customer-driven service standards, communication and control or compensation.

- 1. Customer-driven service standards are concrete, significant and verifiable to the customer.
- 2. Communication of these standards is accessible for all (potential) customers, preferably at locations where customers interact with service providers (e.g. reception desks, newsletters, website). It stands to reason that staff, too, have to be aware of the service standards.

3. Maintain control of your activities. Measure the results and incorporate them in the Plan-Do-Check-Act circle. Assurance of the processes is of paramount importance. This is what brings success: do ordinary things extraordinarily well.

Besides, in some countries, such as the Netherlands the number of times a service standard is not met is a concrete reflection of the activities being performed for customers. When a promise is not met, the delivering organisation has to indicate what action will follow. The idea is that it is unacceptable to simply ignore the failure to meet a standard. The result of this concept is what is called a compensation or redress. Examples of a compensation are an apology possibly together with a gift voucher of €10, a florist's voucher, a cinema or museum ticket, etc.

Citizen charter is a policy term, in practice also called service guarantee or service standard. The innovative idea underlying the citizen charter is to make concrete commitments to the customer relating to the quality of public services. The customer may be a citizen or an entrepreneur.

Transparent communication of service standards generates 'external' pressure to deliver as promised. This external incentive is reinforced if the organisation systematically registers its results including the number of times the standards are not met. To be able to spread real customer-driven service standards, first of all the public organisation has to listen to its customers, for example by inviting citizens to take part in focus group meetings. Citizens regard this participation as meaningful and satisfying.

4. Incentive mechanism: public organizations too can incorporate effective incentives

Since the environment crisis, the food crisis, the raw materials crisis and the credit crisis, confidence in the price incentive of the market has slightly diminished. Nonetheless, the economy needs the price incentive from the market. Public organisations do not have such an incentive. The introduction of customer-oriented service standards which are embedded in a citizen charter – provided these are adequately developed – fills this gap. A citizen charter is a simple concept. It has the beauty of simplicity, and offers a combination of incentives (including the application of compensation):

- The service standards are openly communicated at the place where the service is provided: at the service desk, in the product catalogue on the website, in a letter, etc. These features enable the customer to bring to the notice of the organisation any promises which are not met.
- “You have to live up to your promise.” The service provider has to say what will happen if the service norm is not met. This is called “compensation”, which may take the form of offering an apology, possibly accompanied by a cup of coffee if the customer has to wait too long, offering a ticket for the local theatre or a voucher for flowers. The compensation indicates that the service provider takes his own promises to the customer seriously. It is important that the number of compensations is measured. This is a way in which the performance can be justified simply. The compensation incentive is used to the optimum if the compensation is offered pro-actively. The customer should not have to ask for this.

- It is not only a question of “saying what you do and doing what you say.” What an organisation has to say should also have substance. To allow the incentive to work, the customers have to demonstrate interest in the service standard. Promises therefore have to be customer-driven. Before setting the service standard, the opinions of the customers have to be taken into account. Qualitative research with the help of a focus group (a group discussion involving 8 to 12 customers to consider their wishes and expectations with regard to a service) is increasingly being applied. Listening to the customer forces the organisation to use the customer’s input. This also serves to legitimise the relevance of the service standards. In the event of complaints, reference can be made to this.

The transparent nature of the service standards delivers pressure ‘from outside’ to meet the promises made. To be able to play this role service standards should therefore be: a) succinctly and strongly formulated and easily readable at a glance, b) easy to find, c) verifiable by the customer and d) customer-focused. Examples of service standards are:

- Municipality We will decide on a turbo-permit within five working days; this is a building permit for a dormer window, for example, which complies with the local development plan and meets the quick check criteria of the building regulations.
- Municipality: If you are unable to come to the service desk yourself, then we will come to you. Call 0900-xxx to make an appointment for a house visit.
- Hospital (operation to remove the tonsils):
 - You will not have to wait more than 15 minutes after your appointment time. If you have to wait longer, we will inform you directly
 - One of the parents may accompany the child to the operating theatre (until the child is under narcosis) and may be present in the recovery room after the operation.
- Filing a complaint report at the police station (theft, act of violence, etc.):
 - We will safeguard your privacy: you can file your report in a separate room
 - The police will telephone you within 30 days to keep you informed of the results of the investigation arising from your complaint report.

5. The assumptions and the reality: proven advantages

In the previous paragraph, incentives were developed which play a role in the application of a citizen charter. The results seem plausible, although as yet they are still assumptions. This paragraph addresses the testing of these assumptions in a number of European countries. Citizen charters are practised in many European countries in one form or another.

5.1 Citizen charters in Europe

In 2006 a stock-taking took place in 28 EU countries (then 25 plus 3 accession countries). Of 28 countries, 21 used the tool of a citizen charter, as the table below shows¹. In the meantime, countries like Belgium, the Czech Republic and Romania have already introduced citizen charters in the public sector or are in the process of doing so².

No charter use	7	Belgium, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia
Limited charter use	10	
Considerable charter use	11	
Clear standards/ Citizen involved	8	
Extensively communicated	8	
Redress/Compensation	3	Estonia, the Netherlands, Spain
Clear complaints procedures	6	
Continued Improvement/Evaluation	5	Finland, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain, UK

An interesting observation from the schedule is that the EU countries had a different idea of the concept of a citizen charter. Apparently there were different opinions as to the question: “What is the most effective model?” In recent years, EU countries have discussed this matter extensively within the EUPAN framework. This resulted in a Practitioners Handbook entitled: “Seven steps to a citizen charter with Service Standards³” that was launched in 2008 during the “5th Quality Conference for Public Administrations in the EU” in Paris. The basis of this handbook is the 3C’s approach. It does not include a description of a quality mark system.

5.2 Research in the Netherlands: the effects of the introduction of a quality charter | © TNS NIPO | July 2007⁴

¹ State of the art: Reported prevalence of Citizen Charters in EU Member States (total 28), reported in 2006 by European Administration Network; website www.eupan.eu/3/92/&for=show&tid=108.

² Quality Management in Public Administrations of the EU Member States, Comparative Analyses. European Administration Network EUPAN, Ljubljana, October 2008, p. 107-113

³ The practitioners handbook has been developed in close co-operation with the members of the Innovative Public Services Group (IPSG), a working group under the DG Conference of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN), September 2008

⁴ Research in the Netherlands: The effects of the introduction of a quality charter| © TNS NIPO | July 2007. See: www.kwaliteitshandvesten.nl/bibliotheek/onderzoeken (in Dutch)

Research was carried out in the Netherlands in 2007 into the effects of introducing a citizen charter in de public sector. An increasing number of government organisations use charters. From the casuistry, the experiences appear to be largely positive. Those parties involved have the impression that a charter does help. Some parties see this in a higher level of satisfaction, others in shorter waiting times and customer-focused staff. The question is always to what extent improvements are attributable to the implementation of a quality charter. It is for this reason that TNS NIPO, on behalf of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, made an inventory of communicating service standards on the quality of service provision as experienced by customers and staff.

The key question is: "Do quality charters raise the quality of service provision to citizens?"

Service quality is measured on the basis of customer satisfaction (the 'user-based approach'). This is the difference between 'the expectations of the customer' and 'the experience of the actual service provided'.

The fundamental principle of the study was that a quality charter is based on two main criteria:

1. By communicating promises, you influence the expectations of your customers.
2. When as an organisation you say what you are going to do, you then do what you say.

The empiric study therefore comprised two parts:

- A study at three municipal councils (Almelo, Amstelveen, Tilburg), to establish the influence of a charter on customer expectations. For the purposes of comparability, the same fictitious charter was used in all three municipalities.
- A study in Alphen aan den Rijn, which took place prior to and following the implementation of an actual charter. A 0-measurement and a 1-measurement was made among customers and staff.

During the study with the fictitious charters, customers were shown a number of service standards on arrival. They then went to the service desk, where they were helped, and before they left the building they were asked about their experiences. The respondents were divided into three groups:

- a group which was not shown a charter (control group);
- a group which was shown an unambitious charter (vague standards, no compensation);
- a group which was shown an ambitious charter (strict and concrete standards, compensation).

The customers did not know that these were fictitious charters; they assessed the situation as if the charter were real. The service desk staff did not know which customers had seen a charter. This ensured that customers received the same service, but their expectations varied from the start of the visit to the service desk.

Important findings from the empiric study

1. *The introduction of a quality charter raises the level of customer satisfaction.*

The visitors who were shown a fictitious charter prior to their visit to the service desk were ultimately more satisfied about the service than those visitors who were not shown any service standards. It should also be noted here that the differences in customer satisfaction were limited, and can be attributed to the effect of being shown a charter.

In Alphen aan den Rijn, the municipality where a charter was actually implemented, the increase in customer satisfaction after the introduction was greater. It is not possible to determine exactly to what extent this was caused – partly or wholly – by being shown a charter or, for example, by an actual improvement in the service.

2. *An ambitious charter increases customer satisfaction to a lesser degree than a less ambitious charter.*

Ambitious standards raise expectations relating to service. In the longer term this will have a positive effect on the image of the organisation. However, in the shorter term it has a negative effect on customer satisfaction. In the case of a less ambitious charter, this effect plays less of a role. In spite of this negative effect, the introduction of a charter, whether or not ambitious, on the whole leads to more satisfied customers than the absence of a charter, even though in some 17% of cases the promises were not met! .

3. *Customers respond positively to the application of service standards.*

An overwhelming majority of the visitors (87%) characterised the application of service standards as positive to very positive. It makes very little difference whether visitors are shown an ambitious or less ambitious charter, although the former type scores slightly higher (90% versus 86%). Only 2% gave a negative to very negative assessment. With regard to the *clarity* of the service standards applied, customers give a rather more favourable assessment about an ambitious and concrete charter than about less ambitious charter. What is particularly significant is that more people qualify the standards of an ambitious charter as *very clear* in comparison with the people who were shown an unambitious charter. This was in line with expectations. It is more surprising that the vast majority of people also qualified the unambitious charter as clear.

4. *The introduction of a charter, whether or not ambitious, raises the awareness of quality of service among staff.*

The pressure on staff at the service desk can initially lead to them assessing working with a charter unfavourably. One explanation is that they feel unpleasantly stimulated to have to perform better. It may be that this can be partially mitigated by involving staff more in the introduction of such a charter. The study also suggests that staff are less enthusiastic about working with a charter than are managers and directors, but that they do perform better as a result of the implementation of a charter. The 'big stick' effect of an ambitious charter is expected to have the greatest positive effect on the actual quality of the service provided. In time this will also have an influence on customer appreciation.

5. *Full-time workers have higher expectations of service provision.*

Full-time working customers seem to be more critical than non-working customers. A more critical attitude lowers the measure of customer satisfaction, but the organisation also receives from these full-time workers signals about possible improvements, 7.2 versus 7.6. Waiting time seems to be

more important for full-time workers than for non-working persons. In time these insights may provide an important contribution in segmenting target groups, whereby promises can be made to them which match their requirements.

Finally, it is interesting that the standards from the ambitious and unambitious charters were not arrived at following consultation with citizens. Consultation would probably have resulted in more ambitious standards according to wishes and expectations of customers. On the basis of conclusions 2 and 4, this would have a beneficial effect on the outcomes.

At this moment 141 citizen charters are published on a map on the website <http://www.kwaliteitshandvesten.nl/handvesten-in-nl>. The quality of the citizen charters and its service standards is improved by presenting the 'Prize of the best Citizen Charter'. For the first time in 2008 the municipality of De Ronde Venen was announced the winner⁵. One of the main topics is strengthening the customer orientation by consulting customers before setting or adjusting the service standards (e.g. by focusgroups). This is also reflected in the content of the new Brochure 'In 7 steps to a citizen charter' which serves as a handbook for implementing a citizen charter. A positive element is that customers do appreciate being consulted, as I noticed many times chairing a focusgroup. Essential for the satisfaction in this kind of participation is giving them feedback by sending them the results of the focus group meeting. Another useful tool is the so called e-citizen Charter⁶ presenting 10 quality requirements as starting points for presenting service standards on (digital) contacts with the customer.

5.3 Citizen charters in the UK⁷

The situation in the UK can be described as a step by step evolution.

Step 1: Charters

When launching the Citizens Charter in the UK in March 1991 Sir John Major said "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."

Charters were formal statements setting out the standards that the users of public services might expect to receive. They were a powerful incentive for public service organisations to set, maintain and deliver standards for the customer. Charters marked the first attempt towards engaging with customers and citizens as an integral part of service delivery. By 1997, over 40 national charters had

⁵ See 'Jury report best Citizen charter 2008'; <http://www.kwaliteitshandvesten.nl/bibliotheek/overige-publicaties>

⁶ http://www.burger.overheid.nl/files/workbook_ecc_english.pdf

⁷ Based on information from Roy Stephenson, Deputy Director for Policy Projects in Government Communications, Cabinet Office in the UK and the website www.cse.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

been developed with over 10,000 local charters⁸ also being produced. Amongst the commitments encapsulated within the first tranche of charters were:

- The introduction of outpatient appointment times and a maximum of 2 years waiting time for hospital admission
- Publication of comparative performance data on schools and local authorities
- The strengthening of inspectorates of schools, police, prisons and social services

Step 2: Charter Mark as a tool of change

When Charter Mark started out in 1992 it was an award for customer service, accessible to a handful of elite public services. Over time it developed in order to incentivise improvement and encourage change. Many organisations applied for the award and were allowed to display the logo. The holders of a Charter Mark showed good results, as demonstrated in the table below.

To what extent has Charter Mark helped you to ...?

Source: MORI 2001

Replies indicating 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'	% of Holders of a Charter Mark
Increase customer/user focus	94
Deliver more cost-effective services	82
Increase user consultation	94
Improve staff morale	91
Develop more effective internal processes	86
Develop more effective delivery of services	90
Improve complaints handling	87
Increase co-operation with OGDs/agencies etc	87
Improve communications and published info	88
Improve responsiveness to customer enquiries	92
Improve levels of customer satisfaction	93
Develop service standards which reflect user needs	91
Improve performance against standards	92
Make savings of offer better value for money	53

Research showed that organisations using the Charter Mark tool saw a 5% increase in satisfaction rates against those that did not use it⁹.

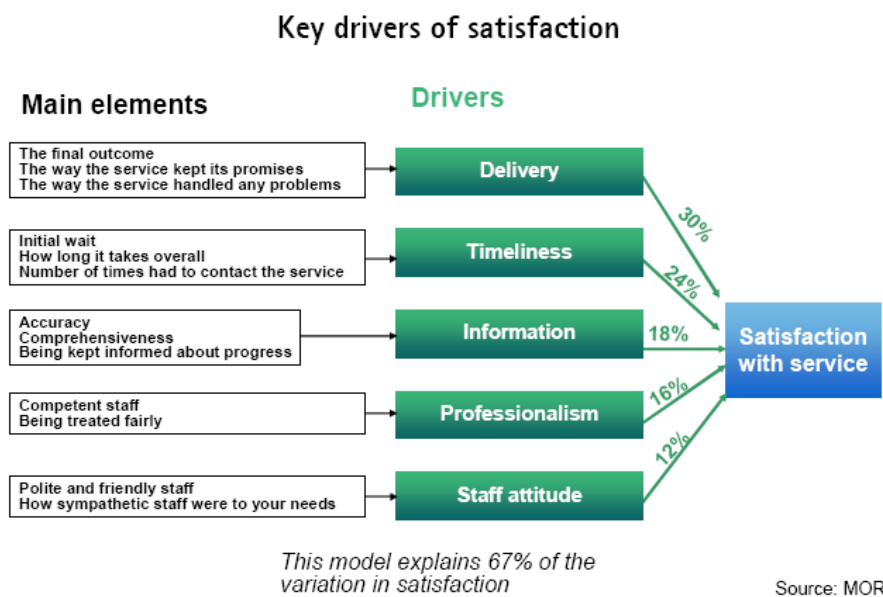
⁸ 'The Customer Voice in Transforming Services' Bernard Herdan, Executive Director of Service Delivery at the Identity and Passport Service, 25/11/1997, Col 441

⁹ Research into users and non users of Charter Mark in the Courts Service, conducted for The Cabinet Office by ORC International in 2004

Step 3: Charter Mark was re-launched in 2004 as a standard, more closely aligned with the public service reform agenda. New assessment arrangements were introduced to support the new dynamic. Mandatory review visits were introduced in between 3-year assessments. This ensured that organisations that had achieved Charter Mark could not afford to let their standards slip and had to demonstrate that they were continuously improving. Failure to maintain an excellent service could result in an organisation losing its Charter Mark status.

Step 4: Customer Service Excellence

Because thinking around customer issues increased, a new customer service standard was developed based on the key drivers of customer satisfaction¹⁰ and with greater emphasis on measuring customer satisfaction.



Customer Service Excellence is the Government's new standard for supporting customer-focused service delivery. It was launched in March 2008 by the Cabinet Office Minister, Tom Watson. Transition arrangements were in place for existing Charter Mark holders who want to make the change to the new standard.

Customer Service Excellence has emerged from the recognition that customer expectations have been raised by demographic and technological change and benchmarks within the best of public, private and third sectors. Customer Service Excellence tests in greater depth those areas that customers have indicated are a priority for them, with particular focus on delivery, timeliness, information, professionalism and staff attitude.

¹⁰ Cabinet Office The drivers of satisfaction with public services, Research study conducted for the office of Public Service Reform, MORI Social Research Institute, April-May 2004; page 3, <http://www.cse.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/UserFiles/File/Key.pdf>

There is greater emphasis on developing customer insight, understanding the user's experience and robust measurement of service satisfaction. The criteria leadership and culture have moved to the fore, whereas financial management and corporate social responsibility – separate criteria within Charter Mark - have a lesser focus. The criteria are user-friendly, with reduced duplication and they are supported by detailed guidance notes and an updated self-assessment tool.

To achieve Customer Service Excellence, the 5 criteria of the standard have to be met and assessed by one of our licensed certification bodies. The Customer Service Excellence Standard also has a self-assessment tool that can help organisations on their way to a formal assessment by collating and allocating evidence as part of a process of working towards formal assessment. This self-assessment should not be considered a replacement for formal assessment.

For each criterion, a number of questions should be answered in preparation for using the tool. The five criteria are:

- *Customer Insight* with questions like 'Do you have an in-depth understanding of your organisation's customers?', 'Do you consult and engage with your customers?' or 'Do you measure the levels of satisfaction with the service you provide?'
- *Culture of the Organisation* with questions like 'Do you have a customer-focused culture within your organisation?'; 'Are you committed to putting the customer at the heart of policy development and service delivery?' or 'Do you value staff in customer service roles?'
- *Information and Access* with questions like 'Do you provide accurate and complete information to customers?'; 'Do you make your services available to all your customers?' or 'Do you work in partnership with other organisations to provide benefits for your customers?'
- *Delivery*: 'A requirement is to have challenging standards for the main services, which take account for the responsibility for delivering national and statutory standards and targets. Other important elements are monitoring performance against standards, benchmarking, consulting customers and taking action if problems are identified'.
- *Timeliness and Quality of Service*: 'Part of this criteria is setting appropriate and measurable standards / promises for timeliness of response for all forms of customer contact including phone calls, letters, e-communication and personal callers'

The conclusions on the basis of the UK case could be:

1. The Charter Mark programme with a relative focus on the use of citizen charters was effective in terms of such aspects as improving effective service delivery, internal processes and staff morale, customer focus and user consultation.
2. Over the years the UK Charter Mark programme has lessened its focus on the use of formal written Citizen Charters with openly published service standards .
3. In 2008 the Charter Mark developed into a new standard, the Customer Service Excellence focusing more strongly on developing customer insight, resulting in robust measurement of service satisfaction. In the assessment procedure there is relatively limited attention to service standards and especially the way they are communicated.

4. In the UK the incentive structure is given form and content more by the assessment procedure than by the open communication of service standards at the place where delivery of the public services occurs.

5.4 Irish evaluation June 2007¹¹

Ireland conducted an evaluation of Customer Charters across 30 organisations in June 2007. Positive developments were noticed such as an increase in the number of charters. Also, the knowledge of customer perceptions improved with the implementation of more customer consultations, setting quantitative targets and formalising of complaints procedures.

Nevertheless considerable weaknesses leave room for improvement. It was found that the charters are too standardised given the diverse range of organisations and given the fact that many organisations are internally quite heterogeneous. Furthermore, the service standards were mainly limited to response times to communications. A further important finding was the limited external accessibility and visibility of the service standards. They were available on the website but too far from the homepage. The service standards are displayed in offices and receptions but a lack of proactivity was identified in making customers aware of them.

In the Irish evaluation some attention is paid to New Zealand and Canada. Their approach is more UK like. In New Zealand the number of Citizen Charters is very small. The approach is focused on goal setting in the fields of assessing customer satisfaction, the use of technology to transform provision of services in enhancing the access, responsiveness and effectiveness of services. In Canada the principal initiative is promoting more customer-oriented services by way of "Citizen First" surveys. Measurement tools are directed to the drivers for higher citizen satisfaction levels which are timeliness, knowledge and competence of staff, fairness, courtesy and comfort and outcome. The evaluation mentions as a pitfall the inbuilt presumption that the service providers know what the citizen wants.

The conclusion of the Irish evaluation is that extra attention has to be paid to publishing external commitments, with more concrete targets in a broader range of public services being actively monitored and reported in Annual Reports. This conclusion is actually in accordance with the importance of a co-ordinated approach of the 3 C's.

Practical Guidelines for the Preparation of Customer Charters were published in 2003 to assist Public Service organisations. The second iteration of these Guidelines has been revised and updated in the light of the 2007 *Report on the Evaluation of Customer Charters*. Part of the 10 core recommendations is 'Departments and Offices should aim to develop user panels and customer focus groups to determine, on an ongoing basis, where resources are best directed and also to provide feedback where necessary'¹².

¹¹ June 2007 Report on the Evaluation of Customer Charters © 2007 Government of Ireland
http://www.bettergov.ie/attached_files/Fitzpatrick%20Report.pdf

¹² Id. Page 19

6. Imperfections of citizen charters

A citizen charter is as strong as the weakest link. A number of imperfections can be noticed in practice, such as:

- Service standards are formulated with (making) reservations (e.g. which means they are less verifiable by the customer);
- Service standards are not communicated openly enough;
- Results are not measured or are not part of the P-D-C-A-cycle;
- Service standards are not meaningful that is to say customer driven.

Imperfections show up when the organisation is not fully confident to show its service standards and meet its customers. A good manner to get in touch with the customers views is by organising a focus group¹³. Focus groups are fundamentally a way of listening to people/customers and learning from them. As such, they use guided group discussions to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs. Using focus groups is an effective approach when there is limited knowledge of a topic or group of people. Typically, a focus group consists of six to ten participants from similar backgrounds. A moderator works with them through a set of predetermined questions and records the key issues raised. What participants say during their discussions are the essential data in focus groups. The role of the moderator is to encourage the discussion, keep it on track, but not to participate or take sides. Focus groups are group discussions where the conversation flows easily with nurturing from the moderator. They are not a collection of simultaneous individual interviews. 'The lively nature of focus group discussions in the appropriate context or environment makes policy issues under discussion much more real'¹⁴, which also counts for public services issues as is indicated by examples in Georgia (US). So focus groups:

- Give room to the customer being an experiential expert who often provides useful advice. This provides useful input to produce customer driven service standards;
- Make the operational management more efficient: working 'from the outside inwards' generates many surprising insights. As a staff member of a Dutch hospital said: "It is time consuming. But working together with patients to improve our service level is so much fun!"; This leads the way to confidence and to the guts to show openly the service standards and measure the results. Without measuring results improvement in the framework of the P-D-C-A-cycle is hard to obtain.

To conclude, a fruitful way to overcome imperfections is to come into open contact with customers and stimulate customer participation in order to be better informed about the needs and expectations of customers. A focus group is an appropriate tool to gain information by fostering customer participation.

¹³ 'Studies have shown that results obtained from focus groups mirror those obtained from survey research methods (see Ward, Bertrand and Brown, 1991)', Modernizing Democracy. Innovations in citizen participation. Edited by Terry F. Buss, F. Stevens Redburn, Kristina Guo, August 2006, p 152 – 163 (ISBN 0-7656-1762-5)

¹⁴ Id. page 158

This too will foster the faith of staff in the own organization as well as faith from the citizen in public organizations as well in democracy¹⁵.

7. Conclusions:

1. Once the UK took the first steps in 1991 in implementing Citizen Charters, this instrument became firmly established in most European countries. Evaluations of the use and the development of the citizen charter tool show the importance of customer participation in various stadia of the production of public services.
2. The citizen charter is used in a variety of different ways in order to improve the quality of services. The two main themes are:
 - a) formal citizen charters whereby customer driven service standards are the main form of expression. These service standards are openly communicated to the customers who therefore know what they can expect (Dutch/Irish model) and can verify the promises done. In a number of countries such as the Netherlands a compensation is attached to the service standard;
 - b) service standards which are incorporated in a quality mark (such as the Charter Mark of Customer Service Excellence Award in the UK), with a less clear communication of the service standards to the customer, but a strong focus on measuring the improvement in customer satisfaction and achieving the quality mark.
3. Both approaches are based on service standards. The incentives differ. With the English model the main incentive is in meeting the requirements of the assessment and acquiring the Charter Mark or Customer Service Excellence Award.

The incentive of the Dutch/Irish model derives its strength from the transparent publication of the service standards – preferably at the point where the service is provided. The principle behind this type of quality charter is: “By saying what you as an organisation do, you then do what you say.” When a promise is not met, in the Dutch model a so called compensation is put at the customers disposal.

Both approaches demonstrably improve customer satisfaction and the quality of service, acknowledging the importance of user consultation. This is apparent both from Dutch research among customers and from the British research among managers and customers.
4. A Europe-wide approach to the implementation of citizen charters has been developed (see the Practitioners Handbook “Seven Steps to a Citizen Charter with Service Standards” which has been developed in a EUPAN context). It appears from this that there is a consensus about the essential elements which make a citizen charter into an effective incentive for improving the quality of public services (3 C’s: customer driven service standards, transparent communication, control/compensation). There is an increasing awareness that customer

¹⁵ See ‘Service charters: reshaping the government-citizen relationship. The case of Spain’, Dr. Lourdes Torres, University of Zaragoza, research project SEC2001-2433. Paper presented at Policy & Politics international Conference, 24-26 July 2003, Bristol, UK: “Service charters in Spain ... seek to improve trust in government However, in some cases they might be only a window dressing to give an image of change and modernisation or ‘new style’” (p23)

insight is essential in making public services more customer-focused. The participation of customers/citizens (via such means as focus groups or in-depth interviews) is very helpful in obtaining customer insight and setting customer driven standards.

5. The role of the customer in the formal written citizen charters is 1) to verify the service standards, 2) to produce input used to establish customer driven service standards. The role of the public service organization is 1) to provide possibilities for participation of customers in e.g. focus groups, 2) to listen to customers and 3) to be transparent in communicating the service standards. Participation of customers and transparency of public organizations together make citizen charter effective.
6. There is an increasing awareness that customer insight is essential in making public services more customer-focused and in being able to communicate and achieve adequate service standards. There are different ways of acquiring insight into the wishes and expectations of customers. The participation of customers/citizens (via such means as focus groups or in-depth interviews) is a prime source of information. Overall, this aspect is gaining greater attention. This can be seen in the replacement of the Charter Mark by the Customer Service Excellence Standard, in the new Irish approach and in the shifting of emphasis of the Dutch brochure "7 steps to a quality charter" in which the contact with the customer is regarded as an essential condition for setting an effective service standard.
7. A citizen charter is as strong as the weakest link. A number of imperfections are lying in wait for (vague service standards, lack of transparency, poor registration of results). In that case a fruitful way to overcome imperfections is to stimulate customer participation in order to be better informed about the needs and expectations of customers. A focus group is an appropriate tool to gain information by fostering customer participation. This direct form of contact will foster the faith of the staff in the possibilities of the own organization. It motivates – is the experience - to perform better and – it is plausible – that customer participation in the framework of a citizen charter fosters the confidence of citizens in the democracy.

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