THE 10TH. NISPAcee ANNUAL CONFERENCE: *DELIVERING PUBLIC SERVICES IN CEE COUNTRIES: TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS*

WORKING GROUP ON BETTER QUALITY ADMINISTRATION FOR THE PUBLIC

Improving The Quality Of Services Delivered In Ireland: Different Approaches To The Challenge Of Change

Dr. Peter C. Humphreys,
Director of Research,
Institute of Public Administration (IPA),
Dublin, Ireland.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, many countries have embarked upon public service modernisation and development programmes that have sought to improve the ways in which their citizens are served. This process is often referred to as 'public management reform', which Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) characterise as deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organisations with the objective of getting them (in some sense) to run better. While these programmes have varied both in their character and rate of progress internationally, they have often shared common features: including a drive for improved quality in public service delivery and a greater explicit focus on meeting the needs of the citizen. As Shand and Arnberg (1996) found in their OECD-wide review, the thinking behind quality reforms is based in part at least upon shifting the balance of power away from the public service provider in favour of the citizen.

In Ireland, as elsewhere, quality public services have a vital role to play in creating and sustaining the necessary environment for economic growth and social progress. For the past 8 years, the Irish public service has been undergoing a major programme of reform in part at least to enable it to keep pace with, and support, wider socio-economic changes. This programme is frequently referred to as the Strategic Management Initiative (SMI). From the citizen's viewpoint, the public service's ability to deliver quality services is the key test of the success of the SMI. While some parts of the public service have been slow to adapt, others have been in the forefront of organisational change to improve the quality of services delivered. Such organisations have pioneered innovative approaches to citizen and staff engagement and been effective in the exploitation of opportunities provided by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

2. Scope and Purpose of the Paper

Drawing upon a number of recently completed research studies, as well as upon the initial findings from work currently in progress, this short paper examines efforts that are being made at both national and local government levels in Ireland to improve the

quality of services delivered to the citizen (see Humphreys 1998 and 2002, as well as Humphreys, Fleming and O'Donnell 1999 and Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell 2001). In summary, this paper:

- reviews the national policy framework that has been put in place, as part of the SMI, to support and encourage the development of quality customer services by public bodies across Ireland,

- its explores, by way of a national case study, the organisational restructuring and the consultative approach that has been adopted by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) to assist it in responding pro-actively to the challenge of change and

- it details a local government case study, where the response to the challenge of change has been different. Meath County Council has undertaken a radical programme of modernisation, through the effective use of ICTs, and has prioritised the geographical decentralisation of its services to District Offices.

By looking at change at three different administrative levels, as well as different organisational approaches to the development of quality services, a number of key management issues relevant to other public administrations across Europe can be identified.

3.   The National Policy Framework for the Improvement of Quality Customer Service

Since 1994, the key aims of the SMI have been (a) providing an excellent service to the public, (b) contributing to national development and (c) making the most efficient and effective use of resources. Because of its direct relevance to each of these aims, it is not surprising that one of the fundamental objectives of the national policy change agenda has been the "achievement of an excellent service for the Government and for the public as customers and clients at all levels" (*Delivering Better Government* 1996)

A very similar objective has been stated with equal force for the SMI at the local government level (see *Better Local Government* 1996).

3.1 An Improved Strategic Planning and Accountability Framework

Since 1996, there have been a number of major legislative and administrative initiatives that have served to underpin efforts to improve the quality of public services developed. Such initiatives include the *Freedom of Information Act (1997)* and the *Public Service Management Act* (1997). As a result of the latter legislation, all Civil Service departments and offices are required to publish three-year *Strategy Statements*, which include explicit goals and high-level objectives (with associated performance indicators) that link with specific commitments to enhance the quality of services they deliver (see Boyle and Fleming 2000). *Annual Progress Reports* are made to the Oireachtas (National Parliament) (see Boyle 2001) and annual Business Plans prepared at individual Unit level to reflect and operationalise the department/office's strategic level objectives.

A similar approach has also been adopted at local government level as part of the SMI. Since 1996, local authorities have been required to develop *Strategy Statements* (Corporate Plans). Published in December 1996, *Better Local Government* (BLG) established a major programme of local authority reform. On the question of customer service specifically, BLG (1996) 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". *Modernising Government – the Challenge for Local Government* (2000) recognises hat delivering quality customer services is at the heart of the current reform programme. Accordingly, it launched a range of Service Indicators for each local authority, which will help individual authority's benchmark their performance against others. Progress against these indicators is reported in Annual Reports.

3.2 A New Quality Customer Service (QCS) Initiative

Within this improved framework, at both national and local levels, a specific Quality Customer Service Initiative was launched in 1997 that continues to guide the overall drive for quality improvement. Under this Initiative, for the first time, each Civil Service department/office was required to produce a two-year *Customer Action Plan* indicating how full effect would be given to a number of guiding principles for the delivery of quality customer service. These initial guiding principles included the need to (a) publish quality service standards, (b) take a pro-active approach in providing clear, timely and accurate information, (c) provide a structured approach to meaningful consultation with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services and (d) provide choice in service delivery including payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times.

While some progress across the Civil Service was achieved during this first phase of the QCS Initiative, significant shortcomings remained for example in relation to effective consultation with citizens, the integration of service delivery and the development of quality standards (see Boyle and Humphreys 2001). The external environment was also changing significantly. As a result, a new QCS Working Group was convened in autumn 1999 with representatives not only from Civil Service departments but also non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and independent experts. This Group recommended a number of significant changes. In particular, three new Guiding Principles were enunciated: (a) Equality/Diversity (given the advent of the *Employment Equality Act* (1998) and *Equal Status Act* (2000); (b) Official Languages Equality (given the proposed *Official Languages Equality Bill*) and (c) the Internal Customer (see Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell 2001 for full details). The recommendations of the QCS Working Group were accepted and in July 2000, the Government decided that:

- The revised QCS Principles would be adopted throughout the civil service.

- Departments/offices would update, refine and publish their new Customer Action Plans (CAPs) so as to give full effect to these revised Principles and to ensure continuous quality improvement.

- Departments/offices needed to ensure that the new Principles were firmly embedded in their Strategy Statements and Business Plans and would report progress against CAP goals and objectives in their Annual Reports.

- Finally, the new QCS Principles were to be extended by each department/office to include any public service organisation, agency or body for which it has responsibility.

All departments and offices have now produced their Customer Action Plans (2001-2004) and initial indications are that substantially more progress is now being made in key areas such as external consultation (see Humphreys 2002). Customer Action Plans are also now published across the public service as a whole, including local government.

3.3 The Effective Use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

In taking the QCS Initiative forward, the government has also stressed that best use be made of available and emerging technologies to improve access to information, as well as improved customer choice through the development of on-line services. Of particular relevance in this regard is the Government decision on Information Society (IS) developments and on the adoption of an E-Broker model as the framework within which electronic public services should be delivered. A range of sites are currently available focused upon particular services including social services (www.reach.ie), business (www.basis.ie), citizen information (www.oasis.gov.ie/) and tendering for government contracts (www.tendersireland.com).

In addition, on-line services are also currently being provided by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners (www.ros.ie/), the Land Registry and the FÁS (National Employment Service) on-line jobs service (www.fas.ie/). Guidelines have been issued to inform and ensure consistency of standards for departmental websites and standards

for departmental web sites are to be incorporated into the new round of Customer Action Plans. An SMI website has been launched as a central information and contact point at http://www.bettergov.ie, as well as at www. betterregulation.ie.

3.4 Commitment to a Partnership Approach

Finally, one of the most distinctive features of the Irish national policy context within which the drive for quality public services has been taken forward relates to the development over the past 20 years of a social partnership model. The OECD (2001) has noted that, "As successive governments in the 1980s sought to tackle the crisis facing the Irish economy due to burgeoning public debt, it became apparent to the social partners (government, employers, trade unions and farming organisations) that fighting over shares of a declining income was fruitless". Since 1987, a series of national partnership agreements have paved the way for the adoption of a consensus approach to addressing a range of economic, social and industrial relations questions.

The current national pay agreement: the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (PPF, 2000) specifically stresses that 'improved standards of service follow from a strong focus on the needs of recipients, the setting of challenging standards in service delivery, and making the best use of available resources. In this context, it is essential to provide for consultation with, and feedback from, both the providers and users of the services in order to identify the required improvements and validate the progress being made subsequently in improving service delivery'. To act as an additional incentive, the PPF provides that certain pay increases will be paid in return for the agreement and achievement of specific performance indicators, one of which is 'the implementation of challenging service standards set in consultation with the recipients of the service'. Provision is also made for the establishment of Quality Assurance Groups for each sector, whose remit is to ensure that such performance indicators are sufficiently challenging.

3.5 The Role of the Centre

The development and articulation of an appropriate policy framework at national level has served to both support and encourage individual public service organisations in their drive to improve the quality of services delivered. Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell (2001) have noted that engagement of Irish public service bodies in existing international and national quality frameworks to date have been limited. Such frameworks include the ISO 9000 series, the European Foundation for Quality Management and the Common Assessment Framework. While participation by public service bodies in these, as well as national frameworks (such as the Q-Mark and Excellence through People, is being encouraged, significant change is unlikely in the near future at least. Under the SMI, the strategy that has been adopted to the development and promotion of QCS at the organisational level has deliberately avoided a highly directive top-down, 'one size fits all' approach (see Gaster 1995). Instead, while there has been very active encouragement, guidance and support from the centre, e.g. through the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) for the Civil Service or the Department of the Environment for local government, individual public service bodies develop their own approaches that are best suited to their particular business profile and customer base.

In this regard, a number of public service bodies have been in the forefront of the movement to improve QCS within Ireland even before the SMI sought to raise overall levels generally in a more co-ordinated manner. Without doubt one of the largest and most committed of these organisations is the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA) (see http://www.welfare.ie/). It is valuable to outline the approach adopted by the DSCFA because it serves as a useful illustration of the significant changes that are required if a public service body is to place quality customer service as a core organisational value and commit to the process of continuous improvement.

4. National-level Case Study: The Department of Social Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA)

Founded in 1947, as the Department of Social Welfare, the DSCFA's mission is to promote social well being through income and other supports which enable people to participate in society in a positive way. The services delivered by the Department include social insurance and social assistance schemes, such as pensions, benefits, allowances and other supports, and directly or indirectly impact upon all citizens, at some point in their life cycles. As a result, the customer base is varied, ranging from categories of individuals (those unemployed, older people, carers, those who are ill or who have disabilities) to families and communities in general.

With 4,500 staff, the department is one of the largest in the Irish civil service and one of the largest single employers in the State. The scale of business is also extremely large in public service terms with payments made to approximately 875,000 people each week and over 1.7 million claims processed annually. The DSCFA's gross estimated expenditure for 2001 was 7.75 million Euro. In his Foreword to the *Strategy Statement 2001-2004*, the Minister responsible states that, "My Department has developed an excellent reputation for providing a high quality service to customers and I am determined that we maintain very high standards in this area" (DSCFA 2001). This justified reputation, as a pioneer in the development of quality public services in Ireland, represents a considerable transformation of organisational culture over a period of two decades. 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 organisational changes have been made to enhance the delivery and quality of the Department's services. These changes were prompted by a range of external and internal factors including, (a) increasingly tight budgetary controls nationally; (b) a growing concern, within the country, at the seemingly inexorable increase in social welfare expenditure; and (c) staff had to manage increasing claim loads, as well as coping with unsatisfactory levels of service provision, resulting in delays in service delivery and increasing

customer complaints (see McCumiskey, 1992). In addition, 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. There was, therefore, a very strong business case for change

In order to understand how the department has gone about its transformation, for the purpose of this paper, it is helpful to examine the approach adopted under two main headings:

- organisational restructuring/decentralisation and
- meaningful consultation with the external customer.

Other aspects of the DSCFA's approach have also been very important and this list is certainly not exhaustive. For example, the DSCFA has also been pioneering in its use of ICTs to improve service delivery. In addition, it has made a very significant commitment to the involvement of staff in the development of quality services, e.g. through its Partnership Committee (comprising management, staff and trade union representatives) and is the first department/office to publish an Internal Customer Service Action Plan. However, the particular approach it has adopted in relation to organisational restructuring and external consultation will serve to illustrate its commitment to mainstreaming QCS throughout its large and complex organisation.

4.1 Organisational Restructuring and Decentralisation

Fundamental organisational re-structuring has underpinned all efforts to enhance the quality of services delivered by the DSCFA. In 1986, the Department was restructured to separate the policy making (Aireacht) and service delivery functions to help 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. 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 serving the Dublin region, all of which were located in the city centre. Today, in the same region, there are nearly 20 local offices situated in a number of suburban areas including neighbourhood shopping centres.

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 being 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).

4.2 Meaningful Consultation With the External Customer

As one of its core values, the Department states that "We value and respect the views of our customers and our shared responsibility in delivering and maintaining quality service" (DSCFA 2001). Within the context of the current *Customer Action Plan (2001-2004)*, these commitments and objectives to meaningful external customer consultation are operationalised, for example, through the use of (a) local and national customer surveys and (b) customer panels. In order to obtain a coherent overview of the department's efforts at meaningful consultation with the external customer, it is important to review both these approaches in turn.

4.2.1   Customer Surveys

Within the Civil Service as a whole, the Department has pioneered the use of externally commissioned market research to obtain an independent assessment of

customer perceptions of the services it provides. To date, three such surveys have been conducted for the Department by the Market Research Bureau of Ireland (MRBI 1986, 1996 and 2001). The results of the most recent survey have been published in summary form, in association with the new Customer Action Plan (DSCFA 2001b). As on previous occasions, the findings of this poll have been distributed to all staff, with booklets summarising the findings made available to customers in the local offices. Undertaking surveys in this way provides not only valuable feedback to staff and customers, to assist with the improvement of services, but also makes it possible to monitor progress against the original benchmark study. In addition to the large-scale national customer surveys, internally conducted surveys of customers are often carried out at regional/local levels. Approximately 40 such surveys have been conducted since 1994. The most frequent topics are disability benefits (6), pension services (7) and unemployment (20). Finally, 'touch-screen technology' has been used in certain offices to obtain feedback from customers at point of service delivery

4.2.2 Customer Panels

The DSCFA has also been in the forefront in its use of customer panels. Since 1994, over 60 such panels have taken place across the country, dealing with particular customer groups/area of service delivery (e.g. the unemployed, lone parents, pensioners, disabilities/carers). Participants are selected at random from departmental records. Some panels are national in character and some are locally constituted. Primarily they provide an opportunity for informal discussion with officials on the service they receive. The minutes of panel meetings are fed back to senior management and action taken where possible. Feedback is given to the customers on the department's response to the issues raised. Panels are also used for systematic consultation regarding proposed initiatives, such as a new comments/complaints system, the development of the Department's website, for proofing new informational material, piloting touch-screen technology and commenting on the draft MRBI questionnaire. Indeed, other public service bodies have been invited to participate in the panels when issues affecting more than the DSCFA have been identified.

5. Local-level Case Study: Meath County Council

Within Meath County Council, the proposals contained in *Better Local Government* (1996) have been acted upon in a dynamic and innovative manner. But, 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. Functionally, the Council has responsibility for the delivery of a range of public services, including roads, housing, water and sewerage, planning and development, environment, motor taxation, higher education grants (www.meath.ie).

In the delivery of these services, however, it is important to understand the changing balance of power relationship between central and local government in Ireland. For example, Collins (1987) has noted the strong and increased degree of control exercised on local authorities from the centre. 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.

5.1 The drivers for change in Meath

Geographically, County Meath is located in the eastern half of Ireland to the north of the Dublin conurbation. It occupies an area of 234,490 hectares, much of which is agricultural land. 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, with population growth in many settlements as a consequence of extensive commuting into Dublin to work. The significant net inward migration of residential population has placed considerable demands on social and physical infrastructure provision. Pressures for housing and associated developments 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. The extreme developmental pressures being placed on the county provide a strong business case for modernisation and internal reform.

At the same time, the SMI provided senior managers 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. For example, in addition to local pressures, 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. As a consequence of the balance of power moving in favour of the centre, linkages with local communities had 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. In embarking upon this programme of change, however, senior management took the view that there was little point in accepting the status quo as the 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.

5.2 Transforming the organisation

At an early stage (1996-1998), it was acknowledged that to transform the Council into an organisation focused on the delivery of quality customer services then a major transformation of the organisation both in operational and cultural terms was required. At the outset, 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. Because much of the Council's work tended to be undertaken in functionally separate "boxes", staff for these seminars 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 workflow 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 Head Office at Navan, which was characterised by many stages but with little value-added by the process at each stage. 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).

5.3 New Information Systems

In order to exploit fully the opportunities provided by the effective use of ICTs to improve 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. Drawing upon the SMI consultation process referred to above; a critical evaluation was taken of existing IT-based systems. This evaluation identified a number of significant shortcomings. Current systems were based on out-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. In order to provide a modern and integrated information platform, the key strategic tool adopted by the Council, in response to this challenge, was the development of a Council-wide Intranet (see Humphreys, Fleming and O'Donnell 1998).

Although continuously 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. 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 is made available to the general public via the *Internet*. Hand in hand with the progress of these web-based systems 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 office.

5.4 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 and, in particular, the fact that service provision, apart from information and advice, was all delivered centrally from the Council Head Office in Navan. On the basis of the detailed analysis and fundamental review of current operations and methods of service delivery, which was undertaken in 1997, 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. The first new District Office opened at Duleek in April 1999 incorporates provision for Health Board as well as Council staff and a further state of the art office has been opened in Dunshaughlin. Furthermore, in1998, 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 are held in the new District Offices, are open to public and press and held in the evenings in order to facilitate attendance.

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. An 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. 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 infrastructure 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 has been introduced:

- A top tier comprising the County Manager and the Management Team (i.e. County Engineer, Assistant County Manager and County Secretary). As well as specific countywide operational duties, each Director of Service has 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. Finance and legal resources underpin these activities.

- 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.

In relation to County Meath, there is little doubt that the organisation has been fundamentally changed over a sustained five-year period of significant organisation restructuring. Few other Irish public service have shared such an experience tom date and, over the next few years, it will be extremely important to monitor and evaluate the impact of these changes upon those the county seeks to serve.

6. The Challenge of Change

In 1998, a major Irish study in the area of quality customer service concluded 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 ... Rarely were customer needs placed centre stage" (Humphreys 1998). The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs is without doubt one of the notable and noteworthy exceptions to the rule. From the above DSCFA case-study, it can be seen that efforts to place the customer centre stage involve a long-term commitment to a fundamental change in organisational culture. While it is acknowledged within the department itself that the drive towards a quality service is a continuous process, there is little doubt that the DSCFA has made significant strives over the past decade and a half to transform itself from a traditional inwardly focused culture to one which genuinely is striving to engage more effectively with its extensive, diverse and often economically disadvantaged customer base. The approach adopted by the DSCFA is also particularly interesting because it demonstrates the benefits of adopting an holistic approach to transforming service quality.

Likewise, the positive efforts of Meath County Council to respond to the challenge of change are also notable and noteworthy. 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 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 (1996) 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.

Compared to the DSCFA, direct engagement with the general public in the formulation and development of improvements in service delivery systems has been limited to date. 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 reflects in part at least the direct democratic accountability already afforded by the local authority system. In Meath's case, this established pattern of local accountability has been developed further through the introduction of Area Council Meetings and District Offices.

It is also true to say that, in addition to the landmark achievements of the DSCFA and Meath, other public service bodies in Ireland have now become active, as never before, in seeking to improve significantly the quality of services provided to the public. In this context, there are a number of significant lessons that can be drawn from the Irish experience to date. In order to encourage and support innovation and a commitment to quality services in the public sector, the Irish experience has indicated the need for a national strategy with supporting structures to underpin and help drive forward the continuous improvement of quality public services. In the Irish case, this approach has included specific initiatives in relation to strategic planning including Strategy Statements, Annual Progress Reports, Customer Action Plans and Business Plans. It has required fundamental organisational re-structuring in order to mainstream QCS values throughout the organisation's business processes. This has often been

facilitated by the effective use of ICTs. It requires a firm and sustained commitment from the political domain as well as senior management. In Ireland, the social partnership model has played an important role. But, whatever the national approach to addressing these issues, the successful response to the challenge of change will require the encouragement of leadership throughout organisations to champion quality services. Quality frameworks can certainly play an important role but that role has been limited in Ireland to date. Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from Irish experience is that no one size fits all. Each administration, at national and local levels, needs to be able to draw upon the experiences of others to help in developing its own solutions not copycat others. In that way, innovation can flourish.

.

Bibliography

Better Local Government: A Programme for Change (1996), Department of the Environment, Dublin: Stationery Office.

Boyle, R. and Fleming, S. (2000), *The Role of Strategy Statements*, CPMR Research Report No.2, Dublin: IPA.

Boyle R. and Humphreys, P.C. (2001), *A New Change Agenda for the Irish Public Service*, CPMR Discussion Paper No. 17, Dublin: IPA.

Boyle, R. (2001), *A Review of Annual Progress Reports*, CPMR Discussion Paper No. 18, Dublin: IPA.

Collins, N. (1987), *Local Government Managers at Work,* Dublin: IPA.

Delivering Better Government (1996), Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (2001), *Strategy Statement 2001-2004: People, Policies, Services*, Dublin: DSCFA.

Gaster, L. (1995), *Quality in Public Services*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Humphreys, P.C. (1998), *Improving Public Service Delivery*, CPMR Discussion Paper No. 7, Dublin: IPA.

Humphreys, P.C., Fleming, S. and O'Donnell, O. (1999), *Improving Public Services in Ireland: A Case-Study Approach*, CPMR Discussion Paper No. 11, Dublin: IPA.

Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell (2001), *A QCS Mark for the Irish Public Service*, CPMR Research Report No. 4, Dublin: IPA.

Humphreys, P.C. (2002), *Effective Consultation with the External Customer*, CPMR Discussion Paper forthcoming, Dublin: IPA.

Joyce, L., Humphreys, P.C. and Kelleher, A. (1988), *Decentralisation: the Civil Service Experience*, Dublin: IPA.

Market Research Bureau of Ireland (1986), Independent Research Findings prepared on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare, Dublin: MRBI.

Market Research Bureau of Ireland (1996), Independent Research Findings prepared on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare, Dublin: MRBI.

Market Research Bureau of Ireland (2001), Independent Research Findings prepared on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare, Dublin: MRBI.

Mc Cumiskey, E. (1992), 'Quality in the Civil Service', *Conference on Public Service Quality*, Dublin: IQA/IPA.

Modernising Government – the Challenge for Local Government (2000), Dublin: Stationery Office.

O'Donnell, R. and Teague, P. (2000), *Partnership at Work in Ireland: An Evaluation of Progress under Partnership 2000*, Dublin: Department of the Taoiseach.

OECD (1996), *Responsive Government: Service Quality Initiatives,* Paris: OECD.

OECD (2001), *Regulatory Reform in Ireland: Governance*, OECD Reviews of Regulatory Reform, Paris: OECD.

O'Shea, R. (1996), 'A Case Study in Quality Improvement - Social Welfare Services Ireland', in OECD 1996.

Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2000), *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000), Dublin: Stationery Office.

Shand, D. and Arnberg, M. (1996), 'Background Paper', in OECD (1996) op.cit., pp.15-38.