Local Government Customer Service Group

Customer Consultation

Guidelines for Local Authorities

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Quality customer service is a touchstone of the local government modernisation programme. It means provision of a high quality service to the customer and the application of the highest standards in dealing with all customers.

Many local authority customers have seen new and progressive initiatives in this area in recent years, such as facilities in local authority offices which allow better interaction with the customer, online access to services, better access for people with disabilities, etc. It is essential that local authorities listen to what customers have to say about the services they provide, about the quality of those services and about the manner in which they are provided. In this way, local authorities can ensure that their services are tailored to the needs of the local community.

The Local Government Customer Service Group, which is representative of my Department, local authorities, the Office of Local Authority Management and the Institute of Public Administration, has produced these guidelines on how local authorities can enhance consultation with their customers. They draw upon best practice both internationally and here in Ireland. Furthermore, they are designed to complement existing consultative mechanisms such as interaction between elected members and the community and also participation by the community in statutory consultation processes such as the drawing up of development plans by local authorities.

These guidelines deal with specific mechanisms for consulting with the public such as customer surveys, customer panels, and focus groups. They are not prescriptive but rather illustrative of approaches that are used in local...
authorities here in Ireland and abroad. Local authorities will need to consider what best suits their own needs and circumstances.

The guidelines identify some important benefits of consultation. These benefits are at the heart of what the local government modernisation programme is all about. It is about ensuring value for money and efficiency in the delivery of services and keeping a strong focus on what the customer wants. Consultation with the customer can play an important part in ensuring that these objectives are met and in promoting ownership of public services by the public.

Dick Roche T.D.
Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
Introduction and Background

Local authorities are responsible for delivering a wide range of essential services to the public. In recent years, major improvements in the way services are provided have been put in place by local authorities, as part of the renewed focus on customer service. The principles underlying customer service are courtesy, accessibility, and fairness in how services are provided. Quality customer service is a core element of the local government modernisation programme. The theme of ‘serving the customer better’ is emphasised both in the modernisation programme and in successive social partnership agreements at national level, including the current agreement, *Sustaining Progress*. There is therefore an onus on public service providers to ensure that they are continuously attentive to the needs of service users.

Customer service improvements have included extended opening hours, improved facilities, more accessibility, and online access to services. Most local authorities publish service standards, in many cases through a public customer charter and customer service action plans. Consulting people about service provision is essential if local authorities are to keep in touch with citizens’ needs. In this way, local authorities can ensure that their services are tailored to the needs of the local community. The ‘closeness’ between local authorities and local communities is one of the key advantages of a vibrant local government system, and part of the rationale for local government itself. While there are many ways in which local authorities get feedback on their activities, these guidelines focus on customer consultation mechanisms.
What is Customer Consultation?

For the purposes of these guidelines, customer consultation means consulting with the users of local authority services about the operation of those services. Such consultation aims to find out what is working well and what is not, and how improvements might be made in the provision of services to the local community.

What the Guidelines do not Cover

Local authorities have well-developed systems of consultation, both statutory and non-statutory, for example:

- elected members, as individuals democratically elected by the local community, are in a unique position to facilitate feedback on the provision of services at local level. They also assist in highlighting problems that can arise on the ground and that members of the public can encounter. These guidelines do not take from the right or ability of local elected representatives to carry out this important function;

- statutory consultation procedures exist for many types of projects – for example, local authorities must consult the public before undertaking particular capital schemes, such as new road projects. In these instances, local authorities sometimes go beyond the minimum levels of consultation that are required by legislation;

- statutory consultation procedures also exist for many plans, policies, and bye-laws that are adopted by local authorities in a wide range of areas, such as waste management, land-use planning and housing strategies – again local authorities sometimes go beyond what is required by legislation;
participation of various interests in the local government policy-making process is made possible through Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs), the County/City Development Boards (CDBs), community and voluntary fora, and youth councils – these are all developed forms of deliberative participation that go beyond consultation mechanisms, involving a wide range of interests in the local decision-making process. However, they obviously can also be used to consult different interests on local authority services. For example, SPCs may include representatives from interests spanning tenant associations, environmental NGOs, and chambers of commerce. Traveller accommodation consultative committees are another form of engaging with relevant interests.

These guidelines are not intended to cover these forms of consultation, but it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the useful role these mechanisms play in gathering feedback on local government activities. Therefore, local authorities should value the systems they already use to consult the public – in particular it is worth emphasising that unlike other public agencies, local authorities are an elected level of government and thus directly accountable to the electorate.

**Purpose of the Guidelines**

The purpose of the guidelines is to advise local authorities on mechanisms for consulting with the public in relation to the delivery of services. In particular, the guidelines examine the use of customer surveys. They also briefly highlight examples of some other mechanisms of customer consultation, such as customer panels, focus groups, and mystery shopping.
Local authorities are continually engaged in consultation as part of their day-to-day activities, through daily contacts between the public, elected representatives, and local authority staff, inviting submissions on new projects and plans through regular notices in the papers, regular SPC meetings, etc. Many local authorities have also undertaken a process of internal decentralisation of service delivery through area offices, which also serves to make local councils more accessible, responsive and accountable. All of this means that consultation is part and parcel of the daily activity of local authorities.

These guidelines are therefore not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of some supplementary approaches that are used in local authorities, such as customer surveys, customer panels, etc. They are not intended to be prescriptive – local authorities will need to consider what best suits their own situation. From international experience, some examples of other ways of gathering feedback from the local community are through interactive websites and e-consultation (often used to complement other consultation mechanisms), face-to-face interviews, comment cards, or holding ‘open days’ or exhibitions. Many of these mechanisms are also used by local authorities in Ireland – for example, local authority websites which carry ‘have your say’ or ‘current consultations’ links.
Benefits of Consultation

Benefits of consulting people are:

- **Continuous Improvement** – Customer consultation can highlight problems at an early stage, allows local authorities to learn from those that use their services, and make improvements where necessary, ultimately leading to a reduction in complaints,

- **Assessing Needs** - Customer consultation helps local authorities in assessing needs, in the planning and prioritisation of services in order to give users what they want, while targeting resources in those areas of greatest need,

- **Fosters Ownership and Better Mutual Understanding** - Customer consultation helps promote greater ownership of public services on the part of the public, a better working relationship with service users, and can lead to better mutual understanding and trust in local government,

- **Customer Focus** - Customer consultation serves as an illustration of local government’s commitment to quality customer services.
These guidelines draw from the following sources:

- examples of best practice identified in local authorities in Ireland and abroad;
- consultation with the local government representative associations and the Consumers’ Association of Ireland;
- responses from local authorities to requests for information on local examples of customer consultation; and
- research in the area of customer consultation.

Customer Surveys

Surveys have become an increasingly popular way of consulting local people about the services provided by local authorities. One of the advantages of customer surveys is that, if well designed and properly conducted, they can provide an authoritative reflection of the views and perceptions of a representative sample of the local population. From this point of view, they are often more representative than for example public meetings, which can attract a low attendance, or some of the other consultation mechanisms referred to in these guidelines.

Determining what the Local Authority Wants to Find Out

When deciding to undertake a customer survey, it is critically important that local authorities focus on what they want from the survey. Local authorities need to identify the target audience for the survey; what is the scope of the survey; should it focus on one or a number of specific services or should it have a more general brief; what are the key issues that should be addressed; is the local authority looking for factual information e.g. in terms of timeframes for service delivery, or is it looking for information in relation to customer satisfaction levels; where customers are dissatisfied, does the local authority wish to find out why? It has been the experience in some countries that while
surveys can often generate *interesting* results, it is important for local authorities to focus on what *use* they will make of the results.

The usefulness of a customer survey largely depends on the questions asked. Before deciding what questions to ask and in particular what information is needed from a survey, local authorities should consult interested parties. These include elected members, organisations representing service users (such as customer panels, see below), local interest groups, and frontline staff. Good practice involves piloting the draft questionnaire with a small group, to ensure that questions are clear, unambiguous and understandable to respondents, that leading questions are not being asked, and that meaningful results will be produced. The following types of questions are typically included in a survey questionnaire:

- questions about the demographic characteristics or profile of the respondent, so that responses can be grouped (e.g. by age, area they live in, level of contact with the local authority, what local authority services they use, etc.);
- questions asking respondents to rate specific services – designed to assist in measuring service efficiency, effectiveness or quality;
- questions that help to understand why respondents give the ratings they do;
- questions regarding the accessibility of services;
- questions regarding the timeliness of activities carried out;
- questions regarding the responsiveness and courtesy of staff where the public have made requests for an activity to be carried out;
- questions asking whether respondents have any suggestions for improving the service;
- questions inviting comments about any other issues respondents might like to raise.
Questions need to be relevant – if a local authority can’t act on the results, there may be little point in including some questions. There is of course a limit to the number of questions that can be asked – generally the fewer the better, as a shorter questionnaire will increase the likelihood of people responding. By the same token, the more questions are asked, the more the survey is likely to cost. Therefore, while it is tempting to include questions on all sorts of issues that may be interesting to include, questions that are of marginal importance should be excluded where possible so that respondents are not overloaded – the focus should remain on what information will be useful, not what information will be interesting. In addition, it should be remembered that each additional question will generate extra data that has to be tabulated and analysed, and some surveys generate so much information that it can be difficult to discern the key messages.

Questions should cover issues that respondents would reasonably be able to have an informed opinion on – questions which encourage ‘hearsay’ opinions, or those which use unnecessary jargon or require specialist or technical knowledge of a subject should be avoided. The pilot screening of the draft questionnaire should help in this respect.

Who should carry out the survey?
Some local authorities have conducted surveys on an in-house basis, in terms of sending out questionnaires, compiling data and analysing results. This can be done for relatively simple surveys, such as exit surveys surveying the views of those that have just visited the local authority. The use of an in-house team for conducting surveys has some advantages, particularly for general surveys. It means that the local authority remains responsible for identifying the key issues it wants to address, and can relate the results to follow-up action that may be required. A few local authorities have used outside consultants to assist in the design of the questionnaire, but have conducted the data collection and analysis themselves.
Other local authorities have preferred to use professional firms or third level institutes e.g. universities with expertise and experience in market research and questionnaire design. Consultants will be able to advise on issues such as questionnaire design, margins of error and sample sizes (ideally at least 100 for each sub-group is usually recommended) to ensure that samples are drawn in a representative and statistically robust manner. Data analysis can also be a time consuming process for those undertaking it for the first time.

If the survey work is being contracted out, the job should not be simply ‘handed over’ to consultants. It is crucially important that any local authority conducting a survey should identify clearly the broad parameters for the survey, the type of information that is being sought, and the target audience for the survey, while making use of the expertise of the survey firm or institute in design issues, and the drafting and phrasing of questions (in essence, the local authority is responsible for the content, and the contractor for the technique). Commissioning surveys can be expensive, so local authorities should make sure that they are going to get information that is useful and relevant to their needs.

*Types of Surveys and Response Rates*

The main types of survey are:

- postal survey;
- face-to-face survey (in households or on-street);
- telephone survey;
- exit survey.
A clear objective of any survey is to maximise the response rate. Response rates can vary significantly, and often depend on the type of survey being conducted. Response rates to postal surveys can be rather low – to reach high levels, special efforts are usually required, such as using pre-paid envelopes, offering prize draws for all who respond, follow up contacts, etc. Keeping the questionnaire short can also help, and it may be useful to include a letter from the Cathaoirleach/Mayor and/or manager emphasising that the results of the survey will be used to examine how services can be improved, and that individual responses will not be reported. It is also usually good practice to give the name of a contact person or a helpline if further information or assistance is required.

Face-to-face surveys, or telephone surveys, allow interviewers to explain questions if necessary, but are usually more expensive than postal surveys. Another alternative is exit surveys, where questionnaires are handed out to people in local authority premises at different times of the day and week, where they are asked to complete the survey before leaving (e.g. asking every tenth user of a library or leisure centre over a number of sample weeks, days and times until the required number of people according to different categories have been surveyed).

**Analysing and Reviewing the Survey Results**

Care needs to be taken when analysing results. Typically, both in Ireland and in other countries, some local authority service areas will tend to get higher satisfaction rates than others. For example, library or fire services tend to get higher satisfaction rates than those services where the local authority is acting in a regulatory capacity such as in planning (where sometimes the local authority may be saying ‘no’ to a service user), and this may be reflected in lower satisfaction levels. This example illustrates how asking about satisfaction rates alone can be potentially misleading. These issues need to be
borne in mind when drawing up the survey and looking at results. In this context, rather than comparing satisfaction levels between different service areas in the same local authority, it may be more useful to look at satisfaction levels for the same service in other local authorities, or comparing changes over time if an earlier survey has been carried out using the same questions.

It is normal practice for survey findings to be discussed and reviewed with those involved in providing the service, before the final report is published. This allows for any issues that may explain trends or problems arising, as well as any actions that are being taken on such issues, to be reflected in the report.

Reporting and Communicating the Survey

The survey report that is produced will typically include the results for each question, as well as the results by each category of respondent according to the needs of the local authority (e.g. age grouping, electoral area, whether or not they use the service, etc.) – once the results are inputted, this quantitative information is relatively easy to compile through statistical IT packages. Compiling the more qualitative results is more time-consuming - the responses to more open-ended questions will also have to be examined, particularly to identify why respondents gave certain answers, or to highlight any suggestions for improvements. This information is important, as it can help highlight potential problems and possible solutions.

Copies of the final report and/or a summary of the results of the survey should be made available, for example through the local authority website, or placed in public libraries. The results of surveys should be presented to the elected members and senior managers, with a summary of results also circulated to staff and partner organisations in the area, as well as service users on request. The local authority may also wish to communicate the results, and actions planned on the basis of the results, to the local media.
Interest in the data generated from customer surveys can vary; some people may be sceptical about the results, or how the figures were arrived at. It is important that an accurate and balanced picture is presented – there will inevitably be both positives and negatives emerging from the survey. Focussing only on the positive may lead people to wonder why the survey was conducted at all, and whether there will be any change as a result, while focussing only on the negative may lead to a defensive stance being taken. Rather the approach needs to be a constructive one that gives credit where it is due, highlighting previous improvements that have been made, as well as reporting on constructive suggestions for change emerging.

If possible, the results of the survey should be published at the same time as the local authority outlines those actions it intends to undertake on the basis of the results – an issue addressed in the next section.

**Follow-Up**

Typically surveys will produce lots of information, and deciding what to do with it all can be somewhat challenging. The priority should be to determine where follow-up is needed on findings, and where it is not. A number of issues are important in this respect. Some results will not need much follow-up, as the feedback may be positive, or the results show the issue is not considered a priority. There may also be issues raised which it may not be possible to address in the short term due to financial, statutory, technical or other restrictions. It is acknowledged by market research companies and survey specialists that there are also occasions when results may not adequately reflect the quality of service provided. This does not mean that the results are not reported, but there may be times when results should be presented in conjunction with other information, such as recent service improvements which may not be reflected in the data (some of this
information may come from other data such as service indicators, or may be based on feedback from staff). In these cases, the results may illustrate a need for the local authority to communicate these changes to the local community.

There will also be issues where follow-up by the local authority is indicated, either within a service area, or in terms of aspects of a service area. The timescale and budgetary implications of changes will need to be considered. Some local authorities have drawn up action plans outlining the changes to be made as a result of a survey. In addition, the survey may highlight issues which may be particularly relevant to other public service providers in the area – where these arise they should be communicated to the agencies concerned.

Pros and Cons of Surveys

Pros:

- a good way of obtaining reliable statistical information;
- if the sample size is high enough, the results can be representative of the population as a whole;
- where repeat surveys are carried out, changes can be tracked over time.

Cons:

- they can be expensive;
- results can be misleading if survey is poorly designed or if the response rates are low;
- if survey is not properly focussed, there may be limited value in the results;
- surveys may fail to pick up on key issues for service users.
Experience in Ireland

A large number of local authorities in Ireland have conducted customer surveys, either on specific service areas or covering local government services generally. The following examples are illustrative of some local authority activity in this area.

Leitrim County Council circulated a postal survey to residents in 2004-2005, but also made copies of the questionnaire available for the public to complete at their offices and on their internet site. While the results highlighted a number of positive findings, for example in relation to the courtesy, friendliness and professionalism of staff, it also uncovered some issues that could be addressed by the council. A report was drawn up and presented to Councillors and staff outlining the findings, as well as a number of actions proposed to address some of the issues raised – these ranged from a customer contact system to track queries from the public requiring follow-up, increased publicisation of direct dial numbers for different sections, a redevelopment of the reception desk at the main offices as a customer care desk, development of local indicators setting targets for response times to queries, customer service training for a wider range of front-line staff, and a designated individual in each section to ensure that information and application forms on the council’s website are kept up-to-date. Some of these issues have also been reflected in the council’s Customer Service Action Plan.

Other local authorities have conducted face-to-face surveys, where interviewers go through the questions with respondents (either at home, in local authority offices, or in the street). For example, in 2004 both Cork City Council and Galway City Council undertook a face-to-face household survey, where respondents were interviewed at their homes. In 2002, Dún
Laoghaire – Rathdown County Council conducted a postal survey and an exit survey asking the same questions in both surveys.

Some local authorities, such as Meath County Council, have conducted surveys targeted at specific stakeholders, such as local businesses, community and voluntary groups, sports clubs and associations, and schools. South Tipperary County Council has conducted a survey of service users, focussing on those areas where a service process is involved, such as housing applications, grants and loans, planning applications, motor tax, libraries, and applications for services such as water, roads or refuse collection.

Some local authorities, such as Galway County Council and Clare County Council, have reported the overall results of surveys along with results according to different electoral areas. In 2005, Louth local authorities commissioned a door-to-door survey, where a random sample of different groupings was selected, to ensure adequate representation between different electoral areas within the county, and borough and town council areas, as well as between different social groupings. In 2003, Sligo County Council conducted a household survey at various sampling points around the county, with interviewers provided with target quotas in terms of respondent gender, age and social class, so as to ensure the final sample was representative of the county’s population.
Customer Panels

A customer panel or user panel consists of a small group of service users, that come together with senior staff of a local authority to discuss issues related to local authority service provision. Such panels can often serve as a useful way of gathering views from users of local authority services, and help local authorities see different perspectives on how they provide services. The panels are used to come up with new ideas on how services can be provided, as well as acting as a sounding board for possible changes envisaged. Usually any issues arising or suggestions from panels are brought to the attention of senior management, and a general commitment is made to act upon these where possible.

Sometimes the membership of the panel is selected at random, for example from the local register of electors. Some local authorities attempt to have a cross-section of service users on the panel – of course the membership will never be entirely representative in a statistical sense, but some attempt at having a range of different people may be appropriate.

Normally, the size of the panel is kept small, with most meetings involving no more than 12-16 people, as well as a small number of local authority staff (one senior official that regularly attends meetings of the panel and provides some continuity, as well as senior management working in the areas under discussion at a particular meeting of the panel). While there is a need for senior management to take part (as they are in a position to ‘make things happen’), the number of people attending from the local authority should be kept to a minimum, so as to avoid the impression that they have a ‘numerical advantage’.
Normally, customer panels have a fixed-term membership. While there are advantages in having members on the panel that become familiar with local authority activities, experience shows that there is always a risk that, the longer individuals are members of a customer panel, the greater the likelihood that they start (consciously or subconsciously) to feel part of the organisation, understanding the local authority’s problems more than the service users – this can mean that they lose credibility with other users, and become less useful as a means of obtaining feedback.

The advantages of customer panels is that they can act as useful sounding boards to test the water on new ideas or approaches relating to services, as well as being a source of ideas themselves. They also help the organisation view issues from a user’s perspective, create continuing dialogue with service users, and can provide relatively quick, useful and inexpensive feedback. However, given that the panel can only consist of a small number of people, it may not be representative of the views of all users, and this has to be borne in mind – information from other sources can help complement views emerging from customer panels.

**Experience in Ireland**

A small number of local authorities in Ireland have established customer panels. Westmeath County Council established a customer panel in 2004, which meets twice a year. The members of the panel were drawn at random from the register of electors – at first 40 individuals were selected, each of which was approached to see whether they would be interested in taking part in such a panel. Of the 40 individuals contacted, 15 expressed an interest. The council also sought to ensure there was representation of certain groups on the panel (such as rate-payers) and that each of the electoral areas were represented, and that there was a broad balance between people living in urban and rural parts of the county.
Focus Groups

Focus groups, usually containing between 6 and 10 people, are normally established to gather detailed information on how a service might be provided, generally on a once-off basis (this is what distinguishes a focus group from a customer panel, which usually meets at regular intervals over a period of time). Experience shows that it can often be useful to have focus groups composed of individuals with certain things in common that allow them to communicate more easily with one another, such as age, background, where they live, depending on what information the local authority is looking for – however, ordinarily the members of the group should not already know each other. They can also be used to find out what specific groups of service users, for example ethnic minorities or disadvantaged groups, think about a particular service or how it is provided.

The panel agreed their own terms of reference, and the council has sought to seek the general impressions of the panel members on council services. Based on some of the discussions of the panel, a number of initiatives have been undertaken, such as extending the opening hours of the motor tax office, and introducing a facility where people can securely deposit motor tax payments out of office hours at the council’s premises. The customer panel also highlighted the low public awareness of the council’s internal complaints system, and therefore the council has decided to make greater efforts to publicise its complaints system to a wider audience.
Typically, a list of questions or areas for discussion is drawn up in advance that should be addressed by the group. The presence of a skilled facilitator is essential, in particular to ensure that some members do not dominate discussion, that everyone has a chance to speak, and that the discussion is kept on track in an impartial way. A record should also be kept of what conclusions the group came to, and these conclusions should be checked orally with the participants before the end of the session. Typically the session will last between 1 and 2 hours, and takes place in an informal setting.

The advantage of this approach is that it helps in finding out what is important to service users, and can uncover issues that may not have been known beforehand. It can also help if the consultation is aimed at certain sections of society. A drawback can be that feedback from the group may not be typical of all service users, and the group format can also be inhibiting for some individuals.

Experience in Ireland

Focus groups have been used by a number of local authorities in Ireland. For example, Dublin City Council has used focus groups in the past as a means of consulting on traffic management issues. Some focus groups made concrete suggestions for ways of improving signposting for drivers who are both visitors and tourists in the city, as well as people living or working in an area.
Mystery Shopping

‘Mystery shopping’ is an approach used to gather specific information and feedback on service delivery. Typically, the organisation hires an individual to evaluate a service in a number of predetermined areas, and reports back to the local authority to give a picture of the experience of a user. It is generally considered suitable for certain types of services, or aspects of services, in particular person-to-person services - for example checking that people are being treated promptly and courteously, or being given the right information. The mystery shopper is normally given guidance on how to assess the service, and can help identify basic problems with systems, such as whether directions are clear, whether the correct information is on display. The process is not confined to personal visits to premises, but can also be applied to information or advice being sought by telephone, by email, or on the internet.

The approach is a relatively simple and inexpensive way of uncovering potential difficulties and problem areas, as well as checking the consistency of service standards across the organisation in terms of courtesy or how requests for information or services are handled. It is also considered particularly useful for monitoring new initiatives, to see whether there are any ‘teething problems’ arising.

However, care needs to be taken in using this approach, as it can be construed as a way of checking up on staff or distracting staff from serving ‘real’ customers. One way around this is to use the process to highlight good aspects to service provision, as well as potential problems. Care also needs to be taken in interpreting results, as ‘one off’ examples may be isolated cases rather than representative of the service as a whole. It is good practice to ensure that employees are advised in advance of how mystery shopping works, what issues are to be evaluated, and how results will be reported, although they are of course not told exactly when it will happen. Normally individual employees are not referred to in the reporting process.
Experience in Ireland

This is a relatively simple process, which has been used by both private and public sector organisations in various countries. The approach was used by Mayo County Council in 2004.

In Mayo’s case, the initiative to use the ‘mystery shopping’ approach came from the staff partnership committee. A consultant was hired to make a number of personal visits to Council premises, as well as enquiries to offices via telephone and email. These involved contact with a number of service areas in the county council’s head office, as well as area offices, libraries, fire stations, and town councils in the area. The ‘mystery shopper’ was asked to examine and assess issues such as facilities and types of information available, empathy and courtesy towards the individual, responsiveness of staff, willingness to solve the problem and communicate a range of solutions or options, and the knowledge of staff about the matter raised. Certain problems came to light, which were addressed in a report to the management team. A copy of the report of the ‘mystery shopper’ was also circulated to all staff.
Feedback from Staff on Customer Needs

Staff, particularly front-line staff, will themselves have come across and experienced a range of people’s views in their service area – including what the customer likes, what frustrates them, and what they would like to see changed. They also have knowledge about practical aspects of providing the service in question, and thus often serve as a valuable source of information at the point of contact with the customer. It is good practice to collect, analyse and review this information. The approach need not be complicated, but rather part of the local authority’s day-to-day activity. Some approaches being used in different organisations are highlighted below.

Experience in Ireland

Information and feedback from staff can be gathered and discussed at regular section or ‘team’ meetings, or on a more informal basis through one-to-one contacts. Some local authorities use a ‘staff suggestion scheme’, where ideas from staff can highlight problems and put forward possible solutions. Many local authorities in Ireland have set up small groups to collect and consider suggestions for improving customer services, such as through their staff partnership committee. Others have circulated simple questionnaires to staff on issues such as where and how improvements in customer care can be made, and what staff require to provide a better service. Encouraging suggestions and comments from staff on customer service issues might be an issue local authorities could consider as part of their staff training programme.
Some Final Points to bear in mind in Consultation

The experience both in Ireland and abroad suggests that the following points should be considered in undertaking customer consultation:

- Bear in mind that each consultation mechanism has its strengths and weaknesses.
- Have a clear focus, identify the issues to be addressed, and what can and cannot be changed.
- Have realistic expectations about achieving consensus.
- Be realistic with consultees about what will happen with the results of consultation.
- Report back to consultees about results and action taken.
- Don’t expect people to give up much of their time.
- Target those that may be difficult to reach.
- Think about working with other agencies.
- Consider the different options available.
Each of these is elaborated in more detail as follows:

*Bear in mind that each consultation mechanism has its strengths and weaknesses:*

As should be clear from the above, there is no one perfect model for consultation. Each approach has its advantages and drawbacks (a summary is provided in Appendix I). Very often the mechanism chosen depends on the type of information wanted, who needs to be consulted, and importantly, how much time and money is available. For example, customer surveys and panels can be particularly helpful when trying to get a broad overview of people’s preferences across the local authority, while other methods such as focus groups can be of greater use in assessing views on particular services. Consultation costs - this may seem self-evident but it is worth pointing out that consultation usually involves both time and money. Some mechanisms (e.g. customer surveys of a representative sample of the population, which are often commissioned out) cost more in terms of financing and time than others (e.g. complaints and suggestions schemes, focus groups). There may also be ways to minimise these costs, such as ensuring that surveys cover the full range of services of a local authority, or by conducting joint surveys with other local authorities in the same region. In addition, one must balance the costs of consultation against the potential benefits, such as ensuring that services continue to be relevant and needed, and improving services with a view to reducing complaints and associated administrative costs.

*Have a clear focus, identify the issues to be addressed, and what can and cannot be changed:*

Customer consultation should have clear objectives. Why is consultation being done? What is the local authority trying to find out? What will it do with the results? Answering these questions in advance can keep the process on track. For example, there is little point consulting service users in the first
place if the local authority can’t make any changes – if this happens, the final result may be ultimately negative, if it creates cynicism or apathy. At the back of one’s mind must always be the question, ‘what action will be taken on the basis of the feedback/information gathered?’ In some cases, it may be necessary to identify and highlight what can be changed and what cannot. The timing of consultation may be important in this respect – it must take place at an early stage so that decisions can be affected.

*Have realistic expectations about achieving consensus:*

One thing that consultation usually cannot deliver is 100% agreement. Consultation will almost inevitably produce differing views. It is important to be up front with consultees at the outset that the local authority is seeking a wide range of views, and that these views may differ, and in many cases suggestions for change can contradict one another. Ultimately those within local government have to make a final call. As the guidance from central government in Britain states, “be aware that there isn’t a single ‘user’s view’, and consensus between all users is highly unlikely”. In assessing the results of a survey, for example, local authorities have to consider their statutory responsibilities, and weigh up legislative, budgetary, technical and other factors, as well as taking into account views expressed.

*Be realistic with consultees about will happen with the results of consultation:*

Following from the previous point, consultation can bring additional information to the table, and thus allow decision-makers to make a more informed decision. But consultation does not mean that the local authority can do everything the consultee(s) might suggest - this misunderstanding has led to frustration in the past. Some suggestions may be unworkable or financially prohibitive, and this reality needs to be acknowledged upfront. A fear commonly expressed about consultation is the possibility of raising
unrealistic expectations on the part of consultees. In this context, it makes sense to be clear, honest and realistic with people at the outset about what can and cannot be changed. Most people are reasonable, and can appreciate that resources are not infinite. As the Audit Commission in the UK have pointed out, consultation “should have a strong influence on decisions, but should not dictate them”. Similarly, at EU level, the European Commission has stated in its principles and minimum standards of consultation that “there is a time to consult and there is a time to proceed with the internal decision-making and the final decision”. Consultation helps identify people’s views on a particular service, but these have to be considered alongside other factors such as resources, statutory requirements, and professional advice and a balancing of viewpoints.

Report back to consultees about results and action taken:
If a local authority has surveyed individuals on local services, ask them if they would like a summary of the final report, as well as information on what the local authority plans to do on the basis of the results. If other mechanisms such as customer panels are being used, changes that are being made on the basis of consultation should be fed back, so that individuals can see that their involvement has been worthwhile. If differing views were expressed, or additional issues had to be taken into consideration in follow-up decisions (such as budgets, statutory obligations, etc.), these should be highlighted – this will be particularly important where decisions have differed from the views of some consultee(s).

Don’t expect people to give up much of their time:
People generally have less time on their hands these days – making it easy for them to make a contribution can help, through minimizing the amount of time they have to spend on a questionnaire or at meetings of a customer panel.
Target those that may be difficult to reach:

Some consultation mechanisms, such as the traditional public meeting, are effectively self-selecting and attract the ‘natural joiners’. What typically happens when consultation is self-selecting is that the articulate and well-educated are better able to use consultation processes than other sections of the community – sometimes some effort has to go into ensuring that ‘the loudest voice’ is not the only one heard. As a general point, some will be hesitant about speaking in public and this may require an element of sensitivity when using certain mechanisms, such as customer panels or focus groups. More specifically, there may be a need to consider targeting specific groups as part of a consultation exercise, such as those with particular needs in certain service areas, such as young people, people with disabilities, the elderly, ethnic communities, the homeless, or other such groups. The local authority may be able to seek out the views of particular organisations active in the local area representing disadvantaged groups, or interests represented on the community & voluntary forum for this purpose. This also helps the local authority in providing services in a manner that is socially inclusive.

Think about working with other agencies:

Local authorities may wish to consider joint consultation initiatives with other agencies operating in the area, if this is appropriate. In some cases, cross-agency consultation makes sense from the local community’s point of view, as people are often oblivious to the range of different providers that may be involved in specific services. Apart from anything else, cross agency consultation is also a way of sharing the costs.

Consider the different options available:

Some methods of customer consultation can be costly, both in terms of time and money. Simple and less costly methods like customer panels can be as
useful or more useful than a detailed customer survey. A lot depends on who needs to be consulted, and what kind of information is required. If decisions affect comparatively few people, a focus group may be appropriate rather than a survey. If quantitative data (such as satisfaction rates) based on a representative overview from the local population is needed, a customer survey is appropriate. If more qualitative information is needed such as suggestions for improvements, other mechanisms such as customer panels, suggestion schemes, and indeed information gathered from internal complaints systems will help yield much useful information. In some cases, different approaches can complement each other. Local authorities may also wish to consider consulting interests on the SPCs, CDBs, community & voluntary fora or youth councils as other approaches to consultation.

Regardless of the approach taken, a simplified indicative approach towards consultation on customer services can be represented as follows:
Identify: focus and objectives of consultation activity; who needs to be consulted; and what information the local authority wants to obtain

Implement and monitor actions to be undertaken as a result of consultation

Decide on consultation mechanism (or mechanisms) that best suits the local authority’s circumstances

Present results, and actions to be undertaken on the basis of the results, to the general public and those consulted

Undertake consultation process, and gather results

Analyse results, consider need for follow-up actions, and discuss internally and with individual sections for comments
OVERVIEW OF SOME ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DIFFERENT CUSTOMER CONSULTATION MECHANISMS

The following table highlights a few selected advantages and disadvantages, drawn from the experience of local authorities in other countries and Ireland, of different consultation techniques mentioned in this document, as well as other mechanisms, such as complaints schemes and public meetings. As noted in the text, the mechanisms do not include feedback obtained from elected members, statutory consultation, and some of the more deliberative forms of consultation and participation currently being used in local government, through for example SPCs, CDBs, community & voluntary fora, youth councils, and area structures.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consultation Mechanism</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer Surveys</td>
<td>Offers access to users of service, can focus on key issues, and a good way to obtain feedback on services based on the view of a wide cross-section of the local community.</td>
<td>Key is asking the right questions. Danger of people wanting to complain/or say the right thing - need to get useful and unbiased feedback. Can be expensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Panels</td>
<td>Quick and inexpensive form of feedback on services, useful ‘sounding board’ for new ideas, and a means of dialogue with a cross-section of different service users.</td>
<td>Limit to how representative the group can be. Discussions can lose direction if not properly facilitated. Group may become overly ‘affiliated’ to the local authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>Opportunity to explore an issue in depth. Can be designed to facilitate those groups that are ‘difficult to reach’ or that live in a particular area/affected by a particular service. Designed as a discussion to generate new ideas.</td>
<td>Limit to how representative the group can be. Discussions can lose direction if not properly facilitated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery Shopping</td>
<td>Relatively inexpensive way of assessing services from a user’s perspective, of clearing up any teething problems when new initiatives are being tried, and of checking consistency of service standards across an organisation.</td>
<td>Can be difficult to know whether a problem is a ‘one off’ or a generic problem. Difficulties may not be representative, and staff need to be assured that the process is not a ‘threatening’ one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints Schemes</td>
<td>Can help identify recurring problems. Shows people you are serious about listening, and will take action when things have gone wrong.</td>
<td>Can be difficult to know whether a complaint is a ‘one off’ or a generic problem – this will usually require further examination.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Meetings</td>
<td>Relatively inexpensive, can be tailored to larger or smaller audiences, can inform, and allows public to express their position on a matter.</td>
<td>May only attract a limited number of people, usually the ‘natural joiners’, can be dominated by activists or those most comfortable with public speaking.</td>
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**MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE GROUP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe Allen (Chair)</td>
<td>Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Caffrey</td>
<td>Director of Service, Sligo County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Callanan</td>
<td>Institute of Public Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Kenny*</td>
<td>Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seamus Lyons</td>
<td>Executive Manager, Dublin City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John McCormack</td>
<td>Director of Service, Kilkenny County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann McGuinness</td>
<td>County Manager, Westmeath County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn Murray</td>
<td>City Manager, Waterford City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmond O’Connor</td>
<td>County Manager, South Tipperary County Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne O’Keeffe</td>
<td>Office of Local Authority Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Tierney</td>
<td>County Manager, Fingal County Council</td>
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**Secretariat:**

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conor Falvey</td>
<td>Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government</td>
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</table>

* Replaced by Frank Gallagher, Department of The Environment, Heritage and Local Government, April 2005