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**"QUALITY, SATISFACTION AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT:
REASSESSING TRUST IN A REINVENTED GOVERNMENT"**

**EGPA STUDY GROUP ON PRODUCTIVITY & QUALITY
IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

*Quality, Satisfaction and Trust from the Perspective of Irish
Public Service Modernisation.*

**Dr. Peter C. Humphreys,
Director of Research,
Institute of Public Administration (IPA),
Vergemount Hall,
Clonskeagh,
Dublin, 6, Ireland.
phumphreys@ipa.ie
www.ipa.ie**

1. Introductory remarks

In their call for papers, the study group convenors state that, “Concerns for declining public trust in government are widespread. One of the strategies to restore trust in government is to engage in a modernisation strategy for the public administration, as the functioning of the administration and public services is considered as a main cause of distrust. Many doubts of the origins of distrust and remedies against it however remain”. Accordingly, the convenors invite papers “supporting or questioning the hypothesis that public sector reforms produce quality improvements, better service or higher efficiency in public services and that this ultimately will lead to more trust in government or vice versa”. Specifically, the convenors pose two questions to be addressed:

- “Do efforts to restore trust take a central place in government modernisation projects?”
- To what extent does a reinvention, re-engineering, New Public Management-reform or modernisation of the administration actually succeed in producing trust in government?”

This paper begins to explore such issues and tentatively answer these questions from an Irish perspective¹. Specifically, and by drawing upon a range of recently completed independent research studies, an examination is made of efforts, as part of the current modernisation programme, to improve the quality of public services delivered to the citizen/customer in Ireland². Within this context, available evidence is also considered on levels/patterns of satisfaction and trust. In addition, potential links between quality, satisfaction and trust in an Irish setting are explored and emergent issues discussed.

For practical reasons, this paper generally adopts a service-wide rather than service-level approach to the related issues of quality, satisfaction and trust. Thus, it does not address in any detail issues relating to trust, for example, in the reliability of a particular public service. Although it could be argued, with some justification, that overall trust in, and satisfaction with, the quality of public services reflects the sum of experiences and perceptions of citizens/customers in their day-to-day contact with government bodies.

2. The size and scope of the Irish public sector

Before commencing a more in-depth discussion of the current modernisation programme, it is important to have an appreciation of the size and scope of the Irish public sector. In summary, the Irish public sector currently employs over 323,000 full and part-time staff³. These staff are directly and/or indirectly engaged in the provision of a wide range of services that play an important role in the economic and social progress of the country. These services include central and local government administration, the military and police forces, the education and health sectors, as well as a wide variety of regulatory, developmental, infrastructural, energy, advisory and other services provided by both commercial and non-commercial state-sponsored bodies. Quite apart from the national, regional and local significance of the services provided, it is also important to note that the public sector employs approximately 20% of those at work in non-agricultural economic activity in the country as a whole⁴. Public sector pay and pensions account for approximately 9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Public Service Benchmarking Body 2002).

3. The public sector modernisation agenda

The Irish public sector is therefore an extremely important national actor in both economic and social terms. It is therefore of considerable significance that, over the past decade, the Irish public service has been engaged upon a wide-ranging modernisation programme (also known as the Strategic Management Initiative or SMI), which has had the following strategic goals: (i) providing an excellent service to the public, (ii) contributing to national development and (iii) making the most efficient and effective use of resources (see P.A. Consulting 2002). This programme has been largely developed and driven forward by senior public servants themselves, with the aid of governmental support since its initiation in 1994. Efforts in earlier decades had met with limited success.

This new change agenda for the public service was first articulated formally in *Delivering Better Government* (DBG, 1996), which recommended modernisation across a broad front. Originally articulated specifically for the civil service, but subsequently extended to the wider public sector, DBG envisaged the service:

- “as a high performance, open and flexible organisation operating to the highest standards of integrity, equity, impartiality and accountability;

- with a mission and culture of quality service to Government and to the public at every level, delivered in a helpful and courteous manner;
- that makes the maximum contribution to national social and economic development and to competitiveness, within a clear strategic framework, both at the level of the individual Department and across Departments;
- making use of effective human resource management systems to ensure that each person who works in the Civil Service can develop to his/her maximum potential in contributing to the attainment of stated goals;
- that provides, through a partnership across all levels in the Civil Service, equality of opportunity for all through its standard of recruitment, conditions of work, training and development of people and promotion practices;
- supported by modern systems of financial management, to ensure value for expenditure undertaken within the limits set by Government;
- that operates necessary and simplified regulations efficiently and fairly” (p.8).

Given the concern with trust issues in this paper, it is interesting to note that the group of Assistant Secretaries responsible for drafting DBG (1996) placed the attainment of the highest standards of openness, integrity, equity, impartiality and accountability in public services uppermost in their change agenda. They also went on to stress that, “The achievement of this vision will provide tangible, long-lasting benefits for Ireland and its people. The most obvious benefit to each and every person will lie in the manifest improvement of quality in the provision of public services, and in greater ease and simplicity in accessing these services. *Major benefits will also result from the enhanced legitimacy of a Civil Service whose principles, rules and workings are open to scrutiny and understood by its users, by Government and by its own members.* The achievement of maximum value for money is also critical since it will result in a more competitive economy and thus contribute to lower levels of taxation. The Civil Service must be competitive by reference to international comparisons and benchmarks” (DBG 1996, p.8).

4. Significant drivers for change

Despite these early references, however, there is little evidence to suggest that efforts to improve public trust per se in the impartiality and integrity of the public service have been significant explicit drivers for change and modernisation over the intervening years. Rather, in Ireland at least, the drive for public sector modernisation and specifically efforts to improve the quality of public service provision can be more readily traced to a number of other factors.

4.1 Socio-economic transformation

For example, the pursuit of economic prosperity and social progress has been an important driver for public sector modernisation in Ireland, just as in turn, improving the quality of public services has played a vital role in helping to create and sustain the necessary environment for achieving economic growth and social development. Ireland in recent years has had one of the most successful economies within the European Union (EU) and this represents a significant transformation from a very different, and not too distant, past. Hand in hand with these years of rapid economic growth, citizen/customer expectations have also risen and this has further helped to increase pressure for improved service quality.

4.2 Public sector change agents

Such socio-economic developments have in turn demanded, and will continue to require, a new and dynamic mindset from public service managers, many of whom would have laboured at earlier stages in their careers through decades of economic under-performance, labour surplus, high unemployment, net out-migration and budgetary crisis. However, encouraged by active engagement with international organisations (e.g. at European Union (EU) and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) levels) and through exposure to the thinking behind New Public Management (NPM), a number of senior-level public servants in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to develop a vision for the Irish public service which would assist it in emerging from a traditional administrative culture and help it to respond positively to the socio-economic challenges facing the country. That challenge is now being taken on in different ways by a new generation of senior public sector change agents.

Having identified at least some of the factors that have encouraged change to date, it is now important to establish some of the key features of the Irish approach to public service modernisation and, in particular, the approach to improving service quality⁵.

5. A focus on quality

Internationally, governments have been striving for a number of decades now to achieve significant improvements in the quality of public services provided often as a core component of wider reform programmes (see OECD 1996, Pollitt and Bouckhaert 1995 & 2000). Similarly, the provision of quality services by public bodies to the wide range of customers they serve is at the heart of the current programme of public service reform in Ireland⁶. Accordingly, *Delivering Better Government* (DBG: 1996) saw “the achievement of an excellent service ... for the public as customers” as the central thrust to its change agenda. Indeed, given the significance of the services delivered by public bodies to the economic and social well-being of the nation, it has been argued that the SMI’s ability to deliver significantly improved services to the citizens that ultimately pay for, and use, those services will be a litmus test for the success or otherwise of the SMI as a whole.

As part of the SMI Programme, in May 1997, a specific QCS Initiative was launched to promote the wider and more co-ordinated adoption of improved customer service standards by civil service departments. Initially, each department was required to produce a two-year *Customer Action Plan* indicating how they intended to improve the delivery of quality customer service in the areas for which they were responsible. However, having reviewed the progress made, the Government established a new high-level QCS Working Group in autumn 1999 which made a number of key recommendations to Government, which were adopted in July 2000. These recommendations included the requirement that, from the beginning of 2001, each civil service department is required to produce a new *Customer Action Plan*, which addresses a number of key issues. In summary, each department/office has to:

1. Ensure staff are recognised as *internal customers* and are properly supported and consulted with regard to service delivery issues.

2. Take a pro-active approach to providing *clear, timely and accurate information* that is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Continue to simplify rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.
3. Publish and display *QCS standards* that outline the nature and quality of service that external customers can expect.
4. Deliver quality services with *courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay*, within a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer.
5. Provide *clean and accessible public offices*, which ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and facilitate access for people with specific needs.
6. Where feasible, *provide choice in service delivery* in terms of payment methods, location of contact points, opening hours and delivery times. Use available and emerging technologies to ensure maximum access and choice, and quality of delivery.
7. Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and *accommodate diversity*, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by that legislation. Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, as well as those facing geographic barriers to services.
8. Provide quality *services through Irish and/or bilingually* and inform customers of their rights to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.
9. Provide a structured approach to *meaningful consultation* with, and participation by, the customer in relation to the development, delivery and review of services. Ensure meaningful evaluation of service delivery.
10. Foster a more *co-ordinated and integrated approach* to delivery of public service.
11. Maintain a well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with *complaints* about the quality of service provided.
12. Similarly, maintain a formalised, well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use *system of appeal/review* for customers who are dissatisfied with decisions in relation to services.

Departments normally publish their Plans on the web and these may be accessed through the government portal at www.gov.ie. Most recently, all departments/Offices are required to publish a *Charter Statement of Service Standards*. In addition, some departments have

developed *Internal Customer Service Action Plans* to support the drive for improved quality of external services (see O’Riordan and Humphreys 2003).

However, while it can be argued that failure to achieve tangible progress for citizen/customers in the improvement of service quality could undermine fundamentally their perceptions of, and even trust in, the capacity and competence of the public service in Ireland, it is difficult to argue that the pursuit of improved levels of public trust has been an important explicit objective of the QCS Initiative to date.

6. Assessing satisfaction

There is though a growing body of evidence on customer satisfaction with service quality now available upon which to make informed judgements for improved policy development and service delivery. As a consequence of the need for departments/offices, under the QCS Initiative, to engage in ‘meaningful consultation’ with their customers as part of the development, delivery, evaluation and review of services, many organisations across the public sector are becoming more pro-active and effective in seeking the views of their diverse customers bases on satisfaction with the quality of services provided. Methods used range from the use of comment forms, the commissioning of externally undertaken questionnaire surveys, the use of customer panels/focus groups to the establishment of regular consultative meetings with key stakeholders, such as the social partners, community groups etc. At the organisational level, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has been in the forefront of such efforts, many of which pre-date the QCS Initiative itself. However, most departments/offices are now seeking information on customer satisfaction, often for the first time, and a detailed overview of current practice is provided in Humphreys 2002.

Due to the often recent advent of such practices, time-series data to assist the monitoring of trends in citizen/customer satisfaction are, however, less frequently available. At the organisational level, the Department of Social and Family Affairs has undertaken three national-level customer surveys (since 1985) and circa 40 regional/local level surveys, often focusing upon specific services and/or social groups. However, this situation reflects the organisation’s unique response to its particular business needs. Of more general relevance to this particular paper are the results from Civil Service-wide surveys of customer satisfaction published by the Department of the Taoiseach (1997 and 2003) and undertaken by Irish

Marketing Surveys and Lansdowne Market Research in 1997 and 2002 respectively. While differences in methodology do inhibit the validity of direct comparisons, some interesting results do emerge from these sources. For example, in 1997, 78% of adults that had experienced direct contact with the civil service over the previous 12 months felt that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the quality of service received. The equivalent statistic for 2002 was 79%. For those that had experienced direct contact with the service, the perceived level of efficiency had, however, risen more markedly between the two base dates. In 2002, 76% of respondents regarded the service as being either fairly or very efficient, compared to 72% in 1997.

Although it is difficult to draw detailed lessons from such headline figures, it could be argued that such small changes in satisfaction levels represent a poor return to the public sector given the considerable investment in the QCS Initiative over the intervening period. However, it can more realistically be argued that maintaining such levels of satisfaction, given the rising economic prosperity of the country and rising citizen/customer expectations, represents a significant achievement. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to note that between 1997 and 2002, the level of contact by citizens with the civil service (over the previous 12 months) had dropped from 32% to 28%. Analysis of the departments contacted suggests that this fall can be largely attributed to the buoyant economic conditions that have prevailed more recently and the associated drop in unemployment claimants. Overall, it is interesting to note that the majority of citizen/customers and businesses felt that the civil service had become more customer focused over the past five years.

7. What about trust?

One of the key questions to be considered by this Working Group is the extent to which “efforts to restore trust take a central place in government modernisation projects”. As the review at (4) above indicates, the desire and/or need to build/restore/promote trust in the public service has not been seen as either a major driver of the modernisation agenda in Ireland to date or a significant, explicit objective of that change agenda. Likewise, while enhanced trust may be a desirable outcome of the improved approach to quality in service delivery by public sector bodies, that has been nurtured by the QCS Initiative, the enhancement of trust has not been an explicit objective of that Initiative to date. In the light of experiences in Ireland, particularly in recent times, this position may merit re-consideration.

In 2001, Boyle and Humphreys (2001) observed that, “The issue of the accountability of the public service is at the forefront of public consciousness in Ireland in a manner without recent precedent. One notable feature has been the number of independent inquiries and tribunals established to investigate specific issues. Such inquiries/tribunals continue to grow in number and the seriousness of the public issues raised” (p. 18/19). Over the past seven years, these inquiries and tribunals have covered a wide range of areas within the public service, including the administration of justice, agricultural payments, public health, tax evasion, town planning and child welfare. While it has not been generally suggested, as a consequence of such inquiries and tribunals, that government departments/offices or their officials have systematically pursued morally questionable business practices, there is little doubt that such public disclosures in recent years have had the potential to damage public trust in the quality of public administration in Ireland and undermine the morale of public servants.

Some of the issues that may have led to such an erosion of trust are unique neither in time nor space. For example, in 1990, Murray argued that, “I remain convinced that in assessing the confidence rating of the civil service, account must be taken of the political culture in which it operates. Most commentators agree that the dominating feature of that culture is clientalism” (p. 93). In a particularly critical and damning report by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Harvey (2002) concluded that, “Ireland is now regarded as one of the more politically corrupt industrialised countries, and although tribunals have done much to determine the nature of corruption, changes to improve the nature of the political and administrative system have been minimal” (p. 7). However, as Collins (1999) points out “... corruption seems to be increasingly common in liberal democracies. Ireland is not alone in witnessing ministerial resignations, tribunals of enquiry and government crises following revelations of ethical misdemeanours by politicians or senior officials” (p. 64).

Within this extremely challenging setting, empirical data that would allow the monitoring of the levels of citizen/customer trust in public services would be extremely valuable. Until recently, such data have not been available in Ireland. However, recent surveys by Lansdowne Marketing (2003) indicate some cause for concern. In a survey of the adult population, only 53% of the general public felt that the Civil Service was “independent and trustworthy”; with a similarly low percentage (52%) feeling they were dealt with “fairly and equitably”. Only 47% of adults sampled felt “Ireland could be proud of its civil service”. However, the positive image of the Civil Service was often higher amongst those who had

experienced direct contact with a department over the previous 12 months. Interestingly, more confidence was displayed by businesses: the equivalent proportions of 65%, 69% and 51% being recorded. One could hypothesise, from these results, that those who had direct and recent dealings with the civil service had more positive attitudes as a result of that experience than those whose opinions may be more generally influenced by recent negative events that received considerable media coverage.

9. Some concluding remarks

As the OECD (2000) has pointed out, “Public service is a public trust. Citizens expect public servants to be committed to serving the public interest by providing impartial treatment and by managing public resources properly on a daily basis. Fair and reliable services inspire public trust and also create a favourable environment for businesses, thus contributing to well-functioning markets. Public ethics are a pre-requisite to, and underpin, public trust, and are a cornerstone of good governance”. The OECD also suggest that the public service reform programmes which have been undertaken in many countries may inadvertently have contributed to ‘irregular behaviour’ by undermining but not replacing existing value systems and by encouraging de-regulation and decentralised decision-taking.

Such an argument has been supported in the Irish context. Boyle and Humphreys (2001) argue that as inquiry has followed inquiry, and disclosure followed disclosure, the public management system has appeared slow to respond with the affirmative action required not only to deal rigorously with the ethical lapses identified but also to ensure the systems and controls are in place to prevent re-occurrence. On the basis of the analysis presented in this paper, an argument can be made for revisiting the importance of enhancing public trust as both an explicit objective for, and outcome of, the next phase of the public service modernisation programme.

Notes

1. The opinions expressed in this paper are the sole responsibility of the author.
2. A more detailed exploration of many of the issues discussed in this paper can be found in studies by Humphreys (1998), Humphreys, Fleming and O'Donnell (1999), Boyle and Humphreys (2001), Humphreys, Butler and O'Donnell (2001), Humphreys 2002 and O'Riordan & Humphreys 2003. These studies are available to download at www.cpmr.gov.ie.
3. This total refers to December 2001 (Source: *Statistical Bulletin*, March 2003, pp144-145, Dublin: Central Statistics Office.) The whole-time equivalence (WTE) of these staff is approximately 307,100 (Source: *Administration Yearbook and Diary 2003*, p.433, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration).
4. Compiled on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) basis, the data for the non-agricultural employment derive from the Quarterly National Household Survey (QHNS) for March-May 2001 (Source: *Administration Yearbook and Diary 2003*, p. 432).
5. Within the scope of this paper, it has not been practicable to identify and discuss all the key drivers for public service modernisation in Ireland. Other significant, which have not yet been above, would include the potential for organisational transformation offered by the effective use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the need to alter established working practices in order to attract and retain the best staff in a more competitive labour market and the external impetus for modernisation as a result for example of changing EU requirements.
6. Further details of the overall modernisation programme are available at www.bettergov.ie and associated links.

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