

SECTION 3 IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES

- 3.1 Establishing a customer orientation
- 3.2 Improving standard setting
- 3.3 Customer service training

3.1 Establishing a customer orientation

The context for change

The Government believes that everyone is entitled to good public services. In the present economic climate taxpayers are also demanding value for money. With limited resources available to fund services, there must be greater awareness of and provision for what the customer requires.

The vision of a public service which is client-oriented and sensitive to the needs of its various customers is one of the fundamental tenets of the reform effort in Trinidad and Tobago. In particular, the new focus on the Public Service as a *facilitator* of private enterprise rather than a *provider* of services, requires that public servants develop a customer orientation in their work.

The principles which the Government believes should underlie all service to the public are:

- *Courtesy and helpfulness*
Convenient opening hours, and courteous and helpful service from frontline staff who will wear name badges for easy identification.
- *Information and openness*
Full, accurate, and easily available information on qualifying criteria and specifications for service.
- *Consultation and feedback*
Regular and systematic consultation with and feedback from users of services.
- *Standards*
Setting, monitoring and eventually publishing standards for the service that individual users can reasonably expect.

Implementing change

As a first step towards achieving this orientation, steps have been taken to introduce across the public service:

- Customer service training for frontline staff – those who interact daily with members of the public – to provide them with the awareness and

skills to deliver quality customer service. Similar training is also given to secretarial staff and receptionists.

- Customer Contact Officers – senior officers who can, if necessary, challenge the system to respond, and who offer an appeal mechanism for the dissatisfied customer.
- Questionnaires, which provide feedback on the performance of frontline officers, as well as on the service provided.

In the Police Service, a Police Complaints Authority has recently been established. Its main function is to receive and investigate complaints against the Police Service, with a view to improving the public image of the Service.

The successful establishment of a customer orientation is dependent on the commitment and enthusiasm of public servants at all levels, but especially frontline staff. Such an orientation does not necessarily mean more costs. It does call for an examination of what is done, how it is done, and how it could be done more efficiently and effectively.

Key stakeholders are all government ministers, Permanent Secretaries and other public servants, citizens accessing the various services.

A vital first step is the introduction of the concepts of customer and quality service to all members of staff including the senior managers, and the training of frontline staff.

Although no overall standards have been specifically set by the Government, except through the vision identified for the public service reform effort, individual ministries have been encouraged to set their own. The general timeframe for a total transformation is about two to three years, but immediate improvements may be seen in individual agencies.

3.2 Improving standard setting

It is recognised that improvements in the overall performance of the public service will only be sustained if measurable standards are introduced. Standards place a direct responsibility on both the individual and the organisation to perform. They help in the identification of strengths as well as weaknesses.

The idea of measurable standards of performance has been introduced by various means into the public service as part of the recent reform initiatives. It is one of the main points of focus in the customer service programme. It is the foundation of the new performance appraisal system which is currently being introduced into the public service. Ministries and departments have also been requested to include performance targets in their strategic plans.

However, standard setting remains a voluntary activity of individual ministries and departments. Although the movement seems to be slowly heading in that direction, no attempt has been made to design a "Citizens' Charter" for the Trinidad and Tobago Public Service.

The Government has not reached the point of developing detailed standards for all its agencies. However, the process has begun through discussions among the senior managers about the need for such standards and the introduction of the rank and file employees to the concept, through customer service orientation and the new performance appraisal system.

A particular initiative in improving standard setting: annual service contracts between the Ministry of Health and the Regional Health Authorities

As indicated previously in Section 2.5, the operational aspects of health services will now be provided by Regional Health Authorities (RHAs). The performance of these Authorities will be evaluated in terms of outcomes, such as the number of patients seen etc., and eventually in terms of the health status of the population, for example disease-specific mortality and morbidity rates.

3.3 Customer service training

Customer service training is a programme to equip senior level and customer service representatives with skills in processing and dealing effectively with members of the public and internal customers.

This ongoing series of programmes is intended to develop the skills of effective customer contact in public servants who deal directly with members of the public. Two levels of customer relations personnel have been trained:

- (i) Persons identified as Customer Contact Officers, i.e. persons to whom members of the public may turn in respect of resolving some issue or for information. These were generally persons of a sufficiently senior level to be able to challenge the system to respond; and
- (ii) Persons who in the normal course of duty deal with the general public, such as over-the-counter officers.

In addition, four ministries and departments with which the public deals most frequently and which were perceived, more so than other departments, to be inefficient, were singled out for special attention. In these departments, training is planned on site.

Areas addressed included understanding self and choosing appropriate behaviour, and skill development in dealing with a range of customers in a variety of situations.

It is anticipated that this training will lead to improved customer relations and concomitant improved public perceptions of service which may be measured by:

- feedback from customers through questionnaires;
- reduction of processing time by at least fifty per cent.

It is fully recognised that other systemic changes need to take place to consolidate the benefits of this initiative. Other initiatives, such as systems analysis, have also been introduced.