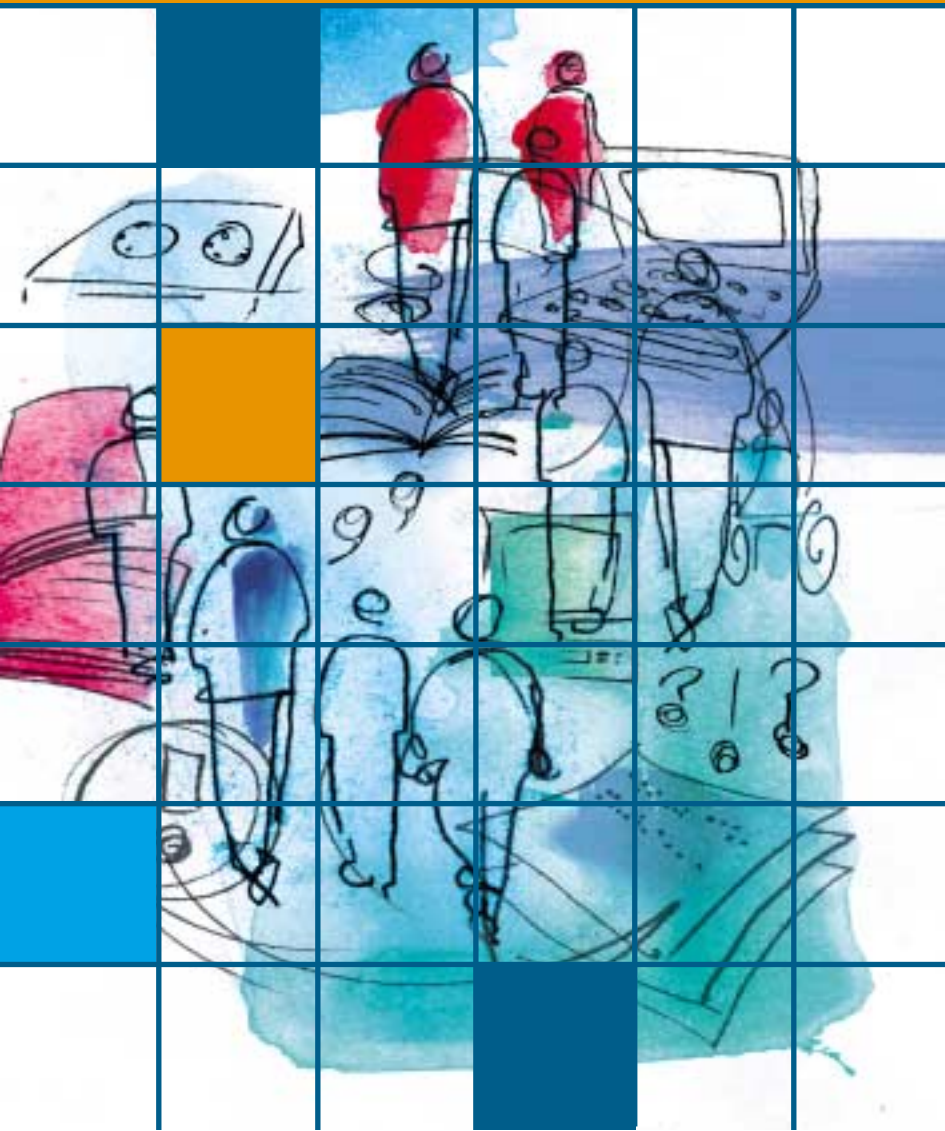


Customer Service Action Plan

2003-2005



THE EQUALITY AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS COMHIONANNAIS

Customer Service Action Plan

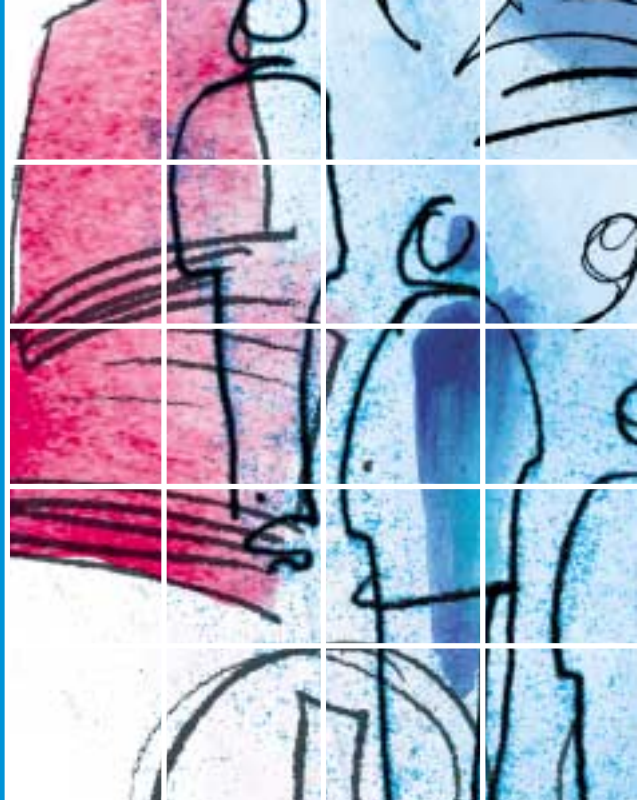
2003-2005



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Foreword



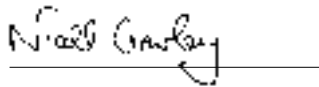
This is the second Customer Service Action Plan of the Equality Authority. It reflects a continuity and a growth in the commitment of staff at the Equality Authority to working with the full range of our customers in a manner that is effective, that combats discrimination, that accommodates diversity and that promotes equality. It builds on the experience of our work over the four years since the establishment of the Equality Authority and seeks to combine a realism, in terms of what can be achieved within our resources and our mandate, with an ambition, in terms of establishing and seeking to realise high standards in the services we provide.

This action plan sets out our commitment to an effective and accessible service to our various customers. It establishes standards of accessibility and effectiveness alongside standards in relation to serving the internal customer – our own staff. It provides basic information on the Equality Authority, on how we are organised and on our different customers.

It is important to pay tribute to the staff of the Equality Authority for their participation in the preparation of this action plan, for their contribution to setting high standards and their commitment to implementing these standards, and for their practice of what we recommend to other service providers.

This Customer Service Action Plan provides a new foundation from which to further develop the various relationships established with our broad range of customers. Of

particular importance during the implementation of this action plan will be the further development of our capacity to generate and learn from customer feedback and the emergence of a new focus on the internal customer, our staff, which should enhance outcomes for the various external customers they work with.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Niall Crowley". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Niall Crowley
Chief Executive Officer



Our Commitment to Quality Customer Service

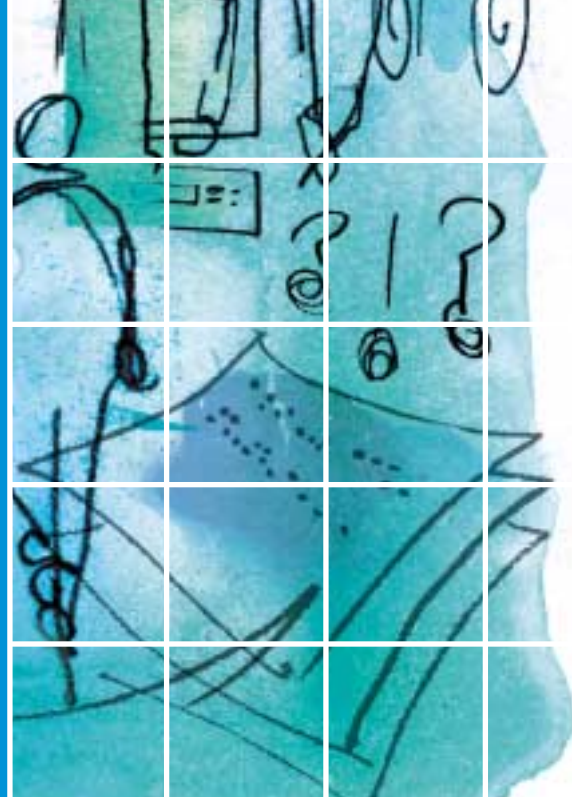


The Equality Authority is committed to quality customer service. We seek to realise standards of accessibility, of effectiveness and efficiency and in relation to the internal customer that reflect the principles established for quality customer service under the Strategic Management Initiative. This is a commitment that extends to all external customers and that recognises staff as internal customers.

Consultation with customers and evaluation are key elements in realising our commitment to quality customer service. We adopt a positive attitude towards comments or complaints in respect of the quality of service we provide, which we consider to be an extension of our customer consultation process.

Part One

Customer Service Standards



About Us

The Equality Authority is an independent body set up under the Employment Equality Act 1998. It was established on 18th October 1999. Our role was further expanded under the Equal Status Act 2000 and the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003.

The Employment Equality Act 1998 prohibits discrimination, with some exemptions, in employment, vocational training, advertising and collective agreements. The Equal Status Act 2000 prohibits discrimination, with some exemptions, in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and educational establishments and makes separate provisions in relation to registered clubs. Both Acts apply to nine grounds: gender; marital status; family status; sexual orientation; religion; age; disability; race; and membership of the Traveller community.

Under the legislation, the Equality Authority has four main functions:

- To work towards the elimination of discrimination in relation to the areas covered by the legislation
- To promote equality of opportunity in relation to the areas covered by the legislation
- To provide information to the public on the working of the Employment Equality Act, 1998, the Equal Status Act, 2000, the Maternity Protection Act, 1994 and the Adoptive Leave Act, 1995.

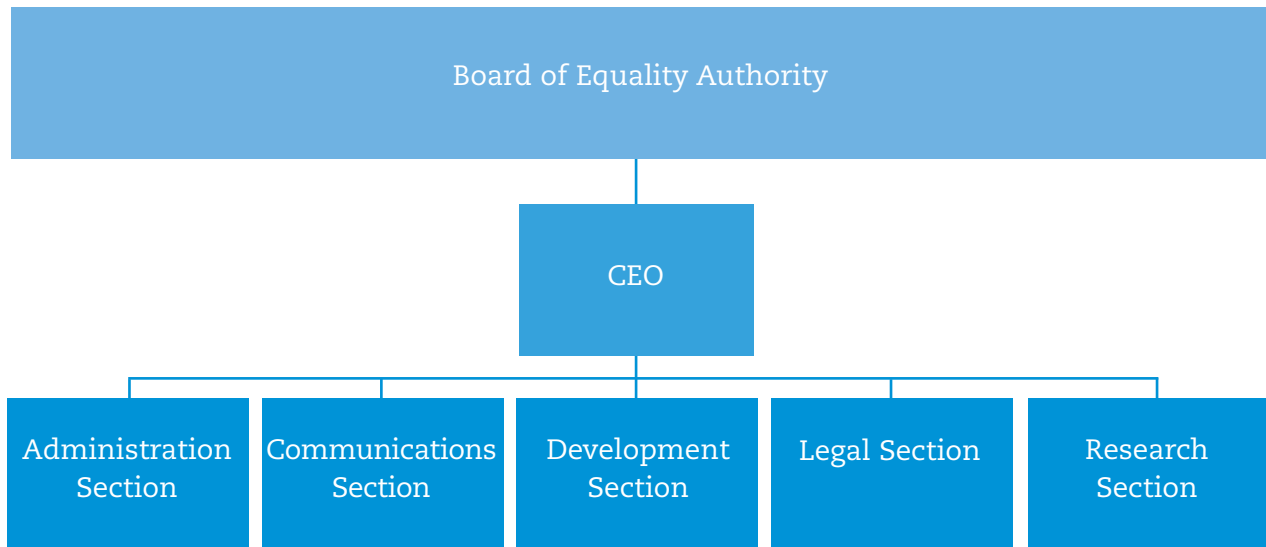
- To monitor and review the operations of the Employment Equality Act, 1998, the Maternity Protection Act, 1994, the Adoptive Leave Act, 1995 and the Equal Status Act, 2000 and to keep under review the working of the Pensions Act, 1990 as regards the principle of equal treatment.

The Parental Leave Act, 1998 also accords the Equality Authority an information role on the provisions of that legislation



Our Work

The Equality Authority organises its work within five different sections.



Administration Section

The Administration Section supports the work of the other sections of the Equality Authority by helping to secure a quality customer service; securing and supplying the necessary human, financial and technical resources and managing the working environment.

Communications Section

The Communications Section works to ensure that the public, and in particular people from across the nine grounds, are informed about the equality legislation and about the work and services of the Equality Authority. It works to make employers and service providers aware of their obligations under the legislation and of effective approaches to the promotion of equality.

A Public Information Centre provides information on the Employment Equality Act, 1998, the Equal Status Act, 2000, the Maternity Protection Act, 1994, the Adoptive Leave Act, 1995 and the Parental Leave Act, 1998.

Development Section

The Development Section works to support a proactive approach to equality issues and to support the development and implementation of effective equality strategies. It implements and supports practical initiatives to promote equality in the workplace and in the provision of goods and services. These include supporting voluntary equality reviews and action plans, developing measures to support a mainstreaming of equality within the private and public sectors and working in partnership with organisations to enhance planned and systematic approaches to equality.

Legal Section

The Legal Section processes applications for assistance in bringing proceedings under the legislation on the basis of criteria established by the Equality Authority. The decision to grant assistance has been delegated to the CEO subject to these criteria. The Legal Section provides legal assistance, where representation has been granted, to those making complaints of discrimination in cases of strategic importance under the Employment Equality Act, 1998, the Equal Status Act, 2000 and the Intoxicating Liquor Act, 2003. Someone who is dissatisfied with the decision of the Chief Executive can have the matter reviewed by the Board of the Equality Authority.

Research Section

The Research Section develops and implements a programme of research to support the goals of combating discrimination and promoting equality and to generate new knowledge and understanding about equality issues and practical equality strategies.

Our Standards

Our standards focus on accessibility, on effectiveness and efficiency and on the internal customer. We work to meet these standards within a context of growing demand and of fixed resources. Inevitably tensions will result between these two issues which present complex challenges in seeking to meet these standards.

The complexity of matters dealt with by the Equality Authority particularly in relation to legal matters can be difficult to understand and appreciate. We seek to ensure that customers' expectations are adequately informed on these issues.

“Our standards focus on accessibility, on effectiveness and efficiency and on the internal customer. We work to meet these standards within a context of growing demand and of fixed resources.”

Accessibility

We are committed to providing a service that is accessible and relevant to all our customers; and that seeks to accommodate needs specific to particular groups of customers covered by the equality legislation. In pursuit of this aim we have developed an Equal Status Policy for the Equality Authority. The following accessibility standards are set out in the context of that policy. The full text of the Equal Status Policy is available separately and provides further detail on these standards and their implementation.

Materials

We ensure that our materials are provided in a relevant and accessible manner to people from across the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation, where there is an identifiable need. We provide materials on our website, by audio, Braille and in various languages. Particular attention in this regard is given to core materials providing information on the equality legislation and its implementation.

Customer Relations

We deal with customers in a considerate, courteous and open manner and will be straightforward, consistent and professional. We provide a safe, harassment-free environment for our customers. We treat all customers equally and fairly, while respecting individual differences and needs.

Reasonable Accommodation of People with Disabilities

We take active steps to reasonably accommodate the needs of customers with disabilities, by providing special treatment and facilities required to enable them to avail of our services. We seek to anticipate the requirements of customers with disabilities and engage in a dialogue to identify individual needs and how best to meet these. We ensure that our premises are accessible to all people with disabilities.

“We are committed to the reasonable accommodation of diversity in the manner in which our services are provided.”

Reasonable Accommodation of Diversity

We are committed to the reasonable accommodation of diversity in the manner in which our services are provided, taking steps to address needs specific to customers from all of the other grounds in order to enable them to avail of our services. This involves anticipation of specific requirements and dialogue to identify individual needs and how best to meet these. We endeavour to ensure a physical environment that is welcoming to all, taking initiatives such as using art and posters on the walls to reflect this commitment.

Relations with Representative Organisations

We strive to develop mutually beneficial professional relationships of partnership with organisations who represent and articulate the interests of people within the nine grounds.

Consumer Feedback

We encourage the participation of representative organisations in feedback systems. We have regular meetings with organisations representing and articulating the interests of those experiencing inequality. We will develop more proactive customer feedback mechanisms including the use of comment cards and questionnaires on our web site.

Communication Strategies

We endeavour to ensure that people across the nine grounds are aware of our service and we implement a communications strategy that uses channels of communication, formats and media that are accessible to all across the nine grounds.

Events

We aspire to provide excellent facilities at all our events. We use safe, accessible premises and provide audio facilities and interpreters including signers as appropriate.

Outcomes

We strive to realise benefit for all groups across the nine grounds, by using positive action measures targeting specific groups and investing in accommodating diversity as appropriate.

Official Languages Equality

We will comply with the requirements of the Official Languages Act 2003, when in operation.

Effectiveness and Efficiency

Meetings and visits to our Office

In dealing with customers calling to the office we will endeavour to:

- Treat all customers in a polite, courteous and fair manner;
- Ensure that all customers have their privacy respected in these meetings and visits;
- Ensure that the reception area is properly staffed during office opening hours;
- Ensure that all matters are dealt with in a confidential manner;
- Ensure that customers are aware of the need to make prior appointments for meetings with staff.

Service by Telephone

In dealing with telephone queries we will endeavour to:

- Operate a telephone information service from 9:15 to 17:30 Monday to Thursday and from 9:15 to 17:15 on Friday;
- Answer all calls promptly and in a polite and friendly manner;
- Identify ourselves to all callers when answering a telephone query;
- Provide information to all callers as quickly as possible;
- Ensure that, if we are unable to deal with a query promptly, we will call customers back as soon as possible;
- Ensure confidentiality in dealing with all calls.

Written Correspondence

In dealing with letters, faxes and e-mail messages we will endeavour to:

- Acknowledge receipt of all such correspondence within 5 days of receiving same;
- Ensure that a substantive reply to a query will issue within 20 days where information is readily available;
- Ensure that correspondents are aware that complex matters and matters of a legal nature can require longer time frames;
- Respond to all queries in a clear, concise and easily understood manner;
- Provide a contact name, section, reference number and telephone number in all correspondence issued;
- Ensure that correspondence does not go unanswered when individual staff members are absent from the office.

E-Communication

In the provision of a service to our customers through e-communications we will endeavour to:

- Ensure that our website is tailored to meet the needs of our customers and is accessible;
- Ensure that any customer who wishes to conduct their business electronically is facilitated.

Service Provided

In the pursuit of an efficient and effective service for all our customers, we will:

- Deal with all queries, correspondence and applications for assistance fairly, professionally and consistently;
- Explain where possible the basis for any decision made;
- Make decisions required as soon as all relevant information becomes available;
- Ensure that the quality of work in all areas is of a high standard and that all sections co-operate to achieve the standards set out in this plan.

Internal Customer

We recognise that staff are our internal customers and in order to provide a quality customer service to them we will endeavour to:

- Ensure that services are delivered to them to a high standard and within the proper deadlines and that they are properly supported and consulted with regard to service delivery;
- Ensure that all staff are aware of the supports available to them both through their line managers and Heads of Section;
- Ensure that all staff are aware of ongoing developments within the Equality Authority by maintaining effective internal channels of communication;
- Maintain a safe working environment for staff and ensure that they are given the logistical support to perform their jobs to the standards required;
- Ensure that as far as possible staff training needs are met both in regard to the work of the Equality Authority and in the furtherance of their careers;
- Provide a mentor to support all new staff when starting work in the Equality Authority.

Any staff member who has an issue regarding the application of internal customer standards should raise the matter with their line manager or Head of Section in the first instance.

Complaints Procedure and Customer Service Officer

It is our intention to maintain the high standard of customer service outlined in this document. However, we recognise that complaints may sometimes arise and to this end we have put in place the following system which aims to ensure that any such complaints are dealt with in a consistent, fair and open manner. To this end we will endeavour to:

- Ensure that customers with a complaint have access to the line manager of the unit concerned at the initial stage of any complaint;
- Inform the customer, where he/she remains dissatisfied, that he/she may pursue the matter further with the Customer Service Officer. The Customer Service Officer will then explore the complaint and issue a further response;
- Acknowledge receipt of complaints within five working days of receipt;
- Issue a reply to a complaint within 20 working days of receipt, or where the matter raises complex matters, to advise of a delayed time frame;
- To improve our processes or procedures, where a complaint highlights any deficiencies in our systems;
- Collate and analyse the type, nature and number of complaints received and disseminate the results of the review throughout the organisation. All complaints received will be notified to the Customer Service Officer for this purpose;
- Circulate information regarding the complaints procedure widely and ensure that access to the procedure is kept as simple as possible.

Role of the Customer Service Officer

The Customer Service Officer will:

- Be the contact person to whom individuals will be directed if they have a complaint or grievance regarding the service they have been given by the Equality Authority, if dissatisfied with the line manager's response to a complaint;
- Explain the procedures used by the Equality Authority in situations where a complaint regarding customer service has arisen;
- Endeavour to issue a response to all complainants within 20 working days of receipt of any complaint;
- Prepare a report with suitable proposals to rectify any defect in the procedures used by the Equality Authority where such a defect is identified following a customer's complaint;

- Collate, log and analyse complaints received by the Equality Authority with a view to establishing an accurate picture of where improvements can be made in the Equality Authority's customer service.

Mr. Éamon Mulligan is our Customer Service Officer, and he may be contacted in writing or by telephone or by e-mail at the following address:

Customer Service Officer
The Equality Authority,
2 Clonmel Street, Dublin 2.
Ph: (01) 4173345
Fax: (01) 4173398
Email: emulligan@equality.ie



Knowing Our Customers

The Equality Authority has a number of differing customer relationships which can be defined as follows.

1. Individual Claimants

This relationship includes individuals who wish to obtain information on their entitlements under the legislation or to seek legal advice and/or representation from the Equality Authority.

2. Equality Organisations

This relationship includes various organisations and interest groups which articulate or address the interests of those within the nine grounds covered by the equality legislation, namely: race; religion; membership of the Traveller community; sexual orientation; family status; marital status; gender; age and disability.

3. Social Partners

The Equality Authority has a range of customer relationships with the social partners. These include employers groups, trade unions, farming organisations, the community and voluntary sector and with individual enterprises and business networks. These are not a homogeneous set of interests and will engage the Equality Authority in different ways.

4. Public Sector

Under this broad heading we include relationships with Government, the Oireachtas, Government Departments, Government Agencies, commercial and non-commercial semi-state organisations and Local Authorities.

5. Internal Customers

This includes all members of staff of the Equality Authority.

“The Equality Authority aims to provide all our customers with the same high quality customer service but is mindful of the differing needs of the different categories of customers.”

The Equality Authority aims to provide all our customers with the same high quality customer service but is mindful of the differing needs of the different categories of customers. We have, therefore, put in place systems and procedures designed to ensure that we know about our customers and that the services being provided are responsive to the needs of our customers, and in accordance with our statutory functions.

The Equality Authority utilises a tracking system as part of our legal and information services to identify under which of the nine grounds the customer is seeking assistance. Ultimately this system helps us to provide a better service to our customers.

We are committed to regular and ongoing consultation with organisations who represent and articulate the interests of all our customers.

In the provision of service to all our customers we will ensure that our responsibilities under the Freedom of Information Act and the Data Protection Act are met.

While our customers are for the most part courteous in their dealings with us, we recognise that a small number of incidents can arise where customers can behave in an aggressive or abusive manner towards our staff. Staff are entitled to a work environment free from sexual harassment, harassment and bullying. We have a policy in place for addressing such incidents if they arise whereby the customer is warned that such behaviour is unacceptable and whereby contact is discontinued if the behaviour continues. More serious instances will be addressed in an instant manner.

Future Initiatives

The Equality Authority is committed to monitoring and reviewing the implementation of this Customer Service Action Plan. This will involve the use of more proactive customer feedback mechanisms including the use of comment cards / a questionnaire on our website. The responses from comment cards / questionnaire will be analysed on a quarterly basis and the results of this analysis will be made available to staff.

We will further develop our e-service to customers. This will include further developing our website to ensure that it is easily accessible and useful to all our customers.

We will implement a staff suggestion scheme to encourage staff to engage proactively in providing a quality customer service.

We will monitor and learn from best practice in the public and private sectors. In this we will have particular regard to the emerging focus on the internal customer and our customer feedback mechanisms.

Towards the end of the period of operation of the plan it will be reviewed with a view to assessing implementation and reviewing the commitments made in the plan. The review will inform the next Customer Service Action Plan.



Contact Details

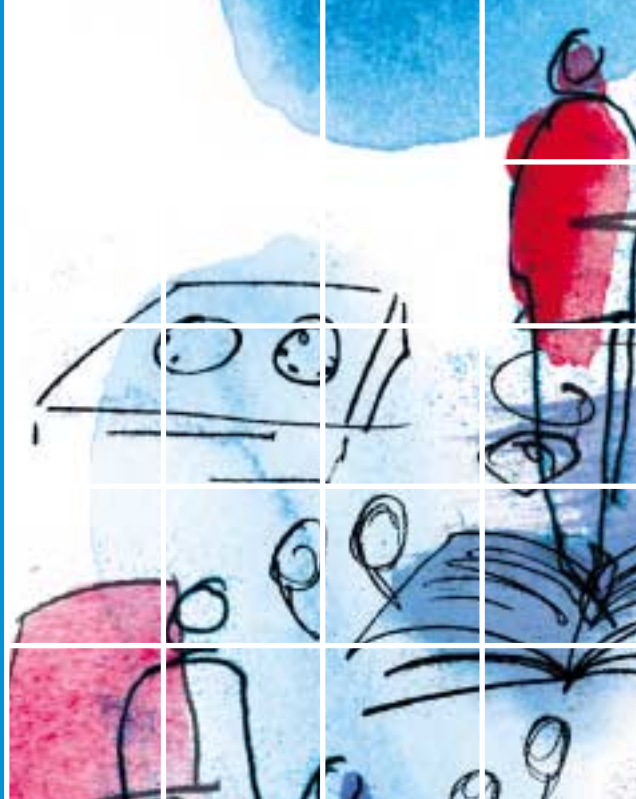
The Equality Authority
2 Clonmel Street, Dublin 2.
Public Information Centre
Lo Call: 1890 245 545
Tel: (01) 417 3333
Fax: (01) 417 3331
Business Calls: (01) 417 3336
Text Phone: (01) 417 3385
Email: info@equality.ie
Website: www.equality.ie

Customer Service Officer: Mr. Éamon Mulligan
Tel: (01) 417 3345
Fax: (01) 417 3398
Email: emulligan@equality.ie



Part Two

Quality Customer Service Principles



The principles established for Quality Customer Service under the Strategic Management Initiative state that, in dealing with the public, Civil Service Departments and Public Service offices will:

Quality Service Standards

Publish a statement that outlines the nature and quality of service which customers can expect, and display it prominently at the point of service delivery.

Equality/Diversity

Ensure the rights to equal treatment established by equality legislation, and accommodate diversity, so as to contribute to equality for the groups covered by the equality legislation (under the grounds of: gender; marital status; family status; sexual orientation; religion; age; disability; race and membership of the Traveller community).

Identify and work to eliminate barriers to access to services for people experiencing poverty and social exclusion, and for those facing geographic barriers to services.

Physical Access

Provide clean, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and as part of this, facilitate access for people with disabilities and others with specific needs.

Information

Take a proactive approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of people with specific needs. Ensure that the potential offered by Information Technology is fully availed of and that the information available on Public Service web sites follows the guidelines on web publication.

Continue the drive for simplification of rules, regulations, forms, information leaflets and procedures.

Timeliness and Courtesy

Deliver quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum delay, fostering a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer.

Give contact names in all communications to ensure ease of ongoing transactions.

Complaints

Maintain a well-publicised, accessible, transparent and simple-to-use system of dealing with complaints about the quality of service provided.

Appeals

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.

Consultation and Evaluation

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.

Choice

Provide choice, where feasible, in service delivery including 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.

Official Languages Equality

Provide quality services through Irish and/or bilingually and inform customers of their right to choose to be dealt with through one or other of the official languages.

Better Co-ordination

Foster a more co-ordinated and integrated approach to delivery of public services.

Internal Customer

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



The Equality Authority

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