

Citizen's Charters¹

Introduction

As public services are funded by citizens, either directly or indirectly, they have the right to expect a particular quality of service that is responsive to their needs and which is provided efficiently at a reasonable cost. The Citizen's Charter is a written, voluntary declaration by service providers that highlights the standards of service delivery that they must subscribe to, availability of choice for consumers, avenues for grievance redressal and other related information. It is a useful way of defining, with stakeholder involvement, the nature and quality of service delivery. In other words, a Citizen's Charter is an expression of understanding between the citizen and the service provider about the nature of services that the latter is obliged to provide.

The Citizen's Charter programme was first launched in 1991 in the U.K. as part of a series of initiatives aimed at enhancing standards of service delivery and making governance more transparent and accountable. This influenced several countries such as Belgium, France, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Spain, Portugal, India etc. to adopt similar measures.

The process of adopting Citizen's Charters in India began with a 'Conference of Chief Secretaries of all States and Union Territories' held in 1996 on "Effective and Responsive Administration." This conference gave high priority to Citizen's Charters and was followed by the development of an "Action Plan for Effective and Responsive Government" at the similar conference in 1997. One of the major decisions taken at this forum was to introduce Citizen's Charters in the Departments of the Central and State Governments, especially those that had a large public interface such as the Railways, Telecom, and Public Distribution. Subsequently, many states have initiated citizen's charters as tools for enhancing standards of service delivery and fostering greater public accountability.

Salient Features of a Citizen's Charter

The salient features of a Citizen's Charter are:

1. Agreed and published standards for service delivery;
2. Openness and information about service delivery;
3. 'Choice' and Consultation with users;
4. Courtesy and helpfulness in service delivery; and
5. Provision of redressal of grievances.

Standards: The Charter should lay out explicit standards of service delivery so that users understand what they can reasonably expect from service providers. These standards should be time-bound, relevant, accurate, measurable and specific. The actual performance vis-à-vis the standards adopted must be published and independently validated. The tendency among organizations to develop targets and standards based on their own convenience as opposed to the needs of the citizens must be avoided.

Information and openness: A key attribute of good service is the availability of relevant and concise information to the users at the right time and at the right place. The Charters should contain, in

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plain language, full and accurate information about services available, levels and quality of service to be expected, available channels for grievance redressal etc. Handbooks, guides, posters, websites are some of the channels through which information can be provided to citizens.

Choice and consultation: The Charter should provide choice of services to users wherever practicable. There should be regular and systematic consultation with the users of the service to fix service standards and to ascertain quality of service delivery.

Courtesy and helpfulness: The Charter can help embed a culture of courteous and helpful service from public servants. In addition, small initiatives such as 'name badges', 'May I help you' counters etc. can go a long way in building customer confidence.

Grievance redressal and complaints handling: There is a strong link between the provision of quality service and effective handling of complaints. Firstly, by facilitating and responding to complaints, the causes for complaint can be reduced. Secondly, by identifying 'trends' in complaints, the service provider can resolve systemic and recurring problems.

Developing and Implementing the Citizen's Charter

How to develop the Charter

Before undertaking a Citizen's Charter initiative, an organization must have clarity on why it is developing a charter and how it can establish the prerequisites for implementation.

An organization should start by answering the following questions:

1. Do we need a Charter?
2. What are the objectives and the scope of a Charter for our organization?
3. Are we clear about who our stakeholders are and how to get them engaged in the Charter initiative?
4. How should we involve the staff and take into account their views on what the Charter should provide?
5. How do we establish service standards and how do we relate those standards to existing performance criteria of the organization?
6. What institutional infrastructure and governance arrangements are required to develop the Charter and are they in place?
7. What are the resource implications of developing a Charter – in terms of time and money (including payment of compensation to citizens for delivery failures)?

Formats and designs

The format and design of the Charter can influence the attitude of the public to the Charter initiative. The presentation of the Charter should interest people and convey a better image of the organisation.

Some key points in the Charter design are as follows:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">a) Keep the charter short and punchy;b) Use plain language, avoiding legalese and jargon; |
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- c) Produce the Charter in different languages so that all the citizens can understand;
- d) Use a common typeface throughout and just one font in each block of text;
- e) Make the Charter attractive but not too glossy – the front cover should draw people in but they should not wonder about the money that has been spent on producing the document.

Identifying and engaging with stakeholders

This is one of the most important aspects of developing and implementing a Charter. Without it the Charter is just a statement of intent rather than a live, meaningful – if voluntary – contract between the state and the citizen. This is a time-consuming and costly exercise and should be carefully planned.

A stakeholder is someone who has a stake or interest – direct or indirect - in the service being delivered. There is likely to be a wide range of stakeholders:

1. Users – the citizen representatives of the users, user groups, citizen advocacy groups, consumer organisations, parents (in the case of schools), politicians, users themselves and past and potential users;
2. Employees and employee representatives – who are involved in delivering services set out in the Charter; and
3. Suppliers – those involved in providing parts of the service, e.g., suppliers for the stamped paper for certificates, software vendors who design an IT application etc.

Once the stakeholders are identified, the next step is to engage them in meaningful discussion. If there is a Nodal Officer in the organisation in charge of the Charter, that individual should be responsible for devising a 'stakeholder engagement plan'. The stakeholders should be met at least twice during the period of developing the Charter, firstly to ask their views on what should be included, and secondly to show them the charter that has been developed as a result of their views. They should be engaged periodically thereafter, especially at the time of review of the charter, which should take place annually.

Establishing service standards

Service standards are effectively the backbone of the Charter. It is, therefore, extremely important that they are developed according to the following guidelines.

1. They must be developed in consultation with citizens. Otherwise the standards set may not relate to aspects of service that citizens prioritise, or as per expected levels;
2. They must be developed in collaboration with planning and performance departments so that other performance indicators are aligned with service standards published in the Charter; and
3. Standards must conform to TRAMS i.e. they must be **T**ime bound, **R**ealistic, **A**chievable, **M**easurable and **S**pecific. For example, the standards should not say that officers will 'do their utmost,' a statement that is neither specific nor measurable.

Establishing a helpful institutional structure for the Charter

It is important to have a recognised focal point of responsibility within a department for the Charter. The evaluation of the Citizen's Charter initiative in July 2002 recommended the establishment of a Nodal Officer with clear reporting lines to senior management and with a brief to attend a government-wide Advisory Group on the Charter. Similarly, better public relations efforts will help raise awareness of the Charter as well as enable customer satisfaction.

Implementing the Citizen's Charter

There are five broad areas involved in implementing the Charter. They are:

1. Generating awareness of the Charter;
2. Establishing citizen-friendly devices to bring the Charter to life;
3. Establishing a complaint handling system;
4. Establishing feedback mechanisms; and
5. Evaluating and reviewing the Charter.

How to generate awareness of the Charter?

Generating awareness of the Charter is, to a large extent, dependent on engaging with citizens to ascertain their needs and expectations. Regular dialogue with citizens' advocacy groups, community-based organisations (such as user groups) and citizens can generate quick awareness of the Charter. Wide availability of the Charter and their prominent display can enhance awareness among citizens and users. The use of other forms of publicity such as audiovisual medium, print, open house meetings, internet etc. can be made based on the profile of the users.

A formal process of review of the level of awareness should be undertaken through occasional surveys about the Charter. This should lead to a review of strategies used to raise awareness of the Charters.

How to establish Citizen friendly devices to bring the Charter to life?

If the development stage of the Charter has been carefully executed, the implementation phase can be easier. Some practical means that can accompany the implementation of Charters are:

1. 'May I help you' counters;
2. Biannual customer needs analysis in collaboration with user groups;
3. Citizen Information Centre;
4. Direct Helpline;
5. Publication of Handbooks and Guides on the service provided;
6. One-stop-shops where citizens can do all their transactions in one place; and
7. Direct engagement with the customer, for example, telephoning or writing to them to seek their suggestions

How to introduce effective complaint management?

1. Designate a location in the office to receive complaints and make it accessible and visible to customers;
2. Acknowledge complaints:
 - a. Personalise the response;
 - b. Talk to customer, if possible;
 - c. Use letters.

3. Develop a system for record-keeping;
4. Process, record, investigate and analyse complaints;
5. Keep the customer informed of the progress; and
6. Periodically analyse the complaints to identify trends.

How to get feedback?

One of the most important prerequisites for getting feedback is to make it easy for the citizen to provide it. This includes, among other things, ensuring that officials are available to see the citizens at the times specified. The different routes for feedback should include a combination of the following:

1. Over the counter at the service outlets;
2. By toll free telephone number;
3. Through regular post, e-mail, fax and telephone;
4. Via community and consumer organisations;
5. Consultative committees; and
6. Through periodic surveys.

How to Evaluate, monitor and review?

It is critically important that the system for evaluating performance against Charter standards is congruent with the department's performance management system. That is, the standards in the charter should not be different from those of individual officials as per their job description or as set out in their departmental indicators. Other forms of evaluation, such as exit polls for user groups and use of surveys and feedback forms give a good indication of the quality of services.

Evaluation should take place regularly. This should be IT-enabled so that data can be analysed in real-time and reports generated automatically on service failures. Self-assessment should be practised with staff to assess how well they think they are delivering services. This can be compared against feedback from customers. External feedback can take a variety of forms:

1. Face to face feedback with users visiting the office;
2. Feedback forms provided to users at the counter;
3. Using the services of voluntary organisations (for example, research organisations, consumer activists, universities, colleges, etc.);
4. Media reports; and
5. Charter Mark system – a formal way for the government to provide feedback through competitive benchmarking of Charters across different departments.

Citizen's Charter programme in Andhra Pradesh

A number of government departments and districts in Andhra Pradesh have developed their own Citizen's Charters. More than 10 departments and 250 local offices have developed citizen's charters. The Centre for Good Governance has assisted many departments to develop and implement the charters. Simultaneously, change management programmes have been undertaken to orient government functionaries towards adopting citizen's charters. The implementation of the citizen's charters and their impact on service delivery is continuously evaluated through exit polls.

Key Lessons

The following pitfalls need to be avoided:

1. Since Citizen's Charters are likely to raise the aspirations of the users of the service, the departments should guard against the tendency to promise more than they can deliver. A realistic assessment of the capabilities of the service provider must be taken into account in drafting the Charter.
2. A critical review of the current systems and processes in the department should be undertaken to examine whether they are likely to have an adverse impact on the Charter.
3. Implementing the Charters without the staff owning them will defeat the purpose of the Charter. Motivating the staff and involving them in the preparation of the Charter are extremely important;
4. The Charters will remain merely a paper exercise of limited value if there is no consultation with the users. Departments should ensure user involvement at all stages of preparation and implementation of the Charter;
5. Independent audit of results is important after a period of implementation of the Charter.
6. Complex systems for lodging complaints or poor access to officers for redressal of grievances defeat the purpose and the spirit of the Charter;

The critical success factor in the entire Charter initiative is developing close relationships with stakeholders throughout the cycle of the charter, from inception and development of standards to raising awareness, to monitoring and reviewing, and determining appropriate compensation for redressal of grievances. At the same time, administrative commitment to change is imperative for sustaining the Charter initiative and enhancing service delivery standards.

References

1. CGG, *A Guide to Developing and Implementing Citizen's Charters*, 2003
2. CGG, *Handbook on Citizen's Charters*, 2004
3. CGG, *Report on Citizen's Charters Evaluation in Andhra Pradesh*, 2004