

**CONCENTRATING ON CUSTOMER
SERVICES – IMPLICATIONS FOR
COUNCILS, COUNCILLORS AND
CUSTOMERS**

**MODERNISATION SEMINAR 13
DECEMBER 2007, RAMADA HOTEL
MINISTER'S OPENING REMARKS**

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. I am delighted to open this, one of the first Local government Modernisation Seminars. As you will see from the technology, I have already whole-heartedly embraced the modernisation agenda and am now able to be in two places at once! Unfortunately, due to last minute pressures, I am unable to be with you in person today, however, you will see from the programme for today's seminar that we have an excellent range of speakers who will share their experiences of delivering improvements to customer services from a variety of

perspectives. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the speakers, particularly those who have travelled quite a distance to be here today. I am confident that you will find today's seminar interesting and informative.

Like many of you, I have been involved in local government for some time, where the customer is very close to the service provider.

The whole area of customer service is an area of great importance to me and also an area which I am aware is very close to the hearts of

many of you here today. It is an area in which I feel we can really make a difference. Our ambition is to put the customer at the very heart of public services.

Your chairman, Arnold Hatch, as many of you will know is not only Chair of APSE, but he is also a member of the Strategic Leadership Board and Vice Chair of Modernisation Sub-Group A. Sub-Group A is responsible for considering a range of issues including: Capacity building, Performance management and Governance, but is also leading in

commissioning the development of a
Customer Services Strategy for the sector.

I am aware from his work on both the
Strategic Leadership Board and also with Sub-
Group A that the whole area of improving
customer services for our citizens is a subject
Arnold is passionate about. I am, therefore,
confident that the members of the Sub Group
will come up with sound recommendations
for how best to proceed in this area.

Today's seminar is being run in partnership with the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE). As Minister with responsibility for local government, I am keen to work in partnership with organisations for the overall benefit of the sector. I am particularly pleased that we have recently cemented our relationship and partnership with APSE with the Department taking up membership. APSE, of course, have an excellent reputation in the area of promoting excellence in public services and I hope this event will be the first in a series of

collaborative projects between APSE and ourselves as we continue to deliver the modernisation programme and ultimately improved public services to our citizens.

As Steve Jobs said “You can’t just ask customers what they want and then try and give that to them. By the time you get it built, they’ll want something new.” It is, therefore, important that we take the time to develop a strategic approach to delivering customer services and that we constantly review our

systems and processes to ensure we are providing the best possible services.

I will return to this theme shortly, but thought I should bring you up to date on events with the RPA.

As you know, when I took up my Ministerial post, I launched a review of the RPA decisions, as they relate to local government.

This review is set in the context of a fully functioning Assembly and Executive providing regional democratic accountability.

The review is underpinned by the Executive's desire to develop strong, effective local government, and improvements in the delivery of a broad range of services across Northern Ireland as a whole.

Since the review was launched in July, I have been engaging with my Ministerial colleagues both individually and in the Executive Sub Committee to address the issues across its three strands. The debate in these meetings has been robust and lively. The discussions were informed and supplemented by desk

research and stakeholder engagement over the summer months in relation to the development of a shared vision for local government. This work culminated in the Emerging Finding paper that I published on 19 October.

Underpinning the initial proposals is the Executive's commitment to a vision of a local government that will improve the quality of life for people and that will create communities that are sustainable, vibrant, healthy, prosperous, stable and people

centred. Careful consideration has been, and continues to be given to the proposals for the functions to transfer from central to local government, with a balance to be struck between the benefits of local service delivery, and the cost implications and economics of scale of disaggregating services that are currently delivered regionally. Both these factors are informing the continuing discussions on the overall number of councils that would best meet our requirements.

I know that many of you in local government were disappointed with the proposals presented but, as I have indicated when I published the paper, the proposals represent the Executive's initial views. Many of you took the opportunity to attend one of the recent stakeholder events to express your views and many have provided written responses to the paper. I have reflected these views to Ministerial colleagues both individually and collectively through the Executive Sub Committee responsible for the

review and those views will be an important factor in informing ministerial discussions.

The Executive is committed to concluding the review in January and announcing these decisions as soon as possible so that we can begin the process of implementing the reform programme that we all want to see.

As we move forward with the implementation of the agreed structural reform and modernisation of local government, I am committed to working in partnership with

local government through the Strategic Leadership Board and its Sub-Groups, through NILGA, and with individual councils.

All will have a role to play in delivering the modernisation and reform programme.

As the programme of work develops over the coming weeks, this partnership and the sharing of experiences between central and local government will become even more important. To support the development of the working partnership, I have already agreed to provide funding for the structural

development of NILGA over the next three years. This will enhance its capacity to facilitate local government's engagement in the process; provide a lead role in communication; and, provide a capacity building programme to develop key individuals and organisations to support the effective and efficient implementation of the agreed programme.

While we await the outcome of the Review, we have agreed that we must press ahead, in parallel, with work on modernising local

government. To this end we have established two Sub-groups of the Strategic Leadership Board.

The Sub-Groups cover the areas of Service Improvement, the Legislative Framework and Capacity Building. The Sub-Groups are working to strengthen the way in which councils work by addressing a range of areas but central to all the work of the Sub-Groups is the citizen and our responsibility and eagerness to deliver accountable citizen-centred services.

Let us accept that the road ahead will not be an easy one, but we are all, I think, agreed that the citizen should be at the heart of all we do both in central and local government.

However, you in local government are closer to the citizen than most of us, and I recognise that it is **you in local government** who are the first port of call for many of our customers. I also recognise that local government are the first point of contact and indeed handle many customer complaints, even when the

complaints are not necessarily relating to the services provided by local government.

I cannot stress enough the importance of us, as a sector, striving to provide consistent customer services, across all councils in Northern Ireland.

I see the development and implementation of a Customer Services Strategy for local government to be a key priority for the future.

I believe the strategy should provide the overarching strategic direction for the sector in

terms of how we develop and improve customer services. It must include:

- how we consult with our customers to identify what they want in terms of service;
- how we interact with our customers in this age of ongoing advances in technology;
- how we gather and maintain strong customer case data which negates the

need for our customers to provide basic customer details time and time again across the range of council services; and finally

- how we handle customer complaints and measure customer satisfaction levels.

It is easy to make the assumption that we know what our customers want and that we are engaging meaningfully with our customers. However, a greater emphasis on customer insight is essential to ensuring we

are delivering the best possible services in line with customer requirements. A sharper focus on customer insight in terms of knowing who are customers are and what they expect will assist with the development and implementation of a citizen centred community planning process. This should ensure that all of us involved in the provision of public services work together in terms of meeting and exceeding customer requirements and targeting resources appropriately.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your attendance at today's event. I am sure you will find the seminar both helpful and informative.

Finally, I would like to send my personal thanks to Sub-Group A for all their efforts to date and wish them well in their continuing work in relation to the development of a Customer Services Strategy for the sector. I must say that I look forward to seeing the outcome of their work.

I hope you enjoy the rest of the seminar.

Thank you.