

**CUSTOMER SERVICE ACTION PLAN**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **CUSTOMER SERVICE ACTION PLAN**

Through our Corporate Plan we have sought to articulate in a meaningful way the mission, or purpose, of the Carlow local authorities, the values that we subscribe to and the specific objectives and strategies that we are pursuing in our main service areas. We are determined to translate these objectives and strategies into effective action and thereby secure the best possible future for the county.

As a democratic public service organisation, we are also very conscious of the need to ensure that our service objectives and strategies are pursued in a manner that produces a high degree of customer satisfaction. In order to ensure that our services are responsive, of high quality and delivered in a customer friendly way, we are also publishing a customer service action plan. This plan sets out the basic principles of customer service adopted by the Council. It details the nature and quality of service, which our customers can expect to receive, and the actions being undertaken by the Council in order to secure further improvements.

## SECTION 1

### CUSTOMER SERVICE CHARTER

#### ***WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT WHEN CONTACTING THE CARLOW LOCAL AUTHORITIES?***

The Carlow Local Authorities provide a broad range of social, infrastructural, regulatory and promotional services to and on behalf of the people of the county. A wide range of customers make contact with our staff and elected members in relation to our services.

#### **These include:-**

- Members of the public including those from within vulnerable groups - disabled, elderly, travellers etc.
- Local public representatives together with members of the Oireachtas and European Union
- Staff of the local authorities and other public service agencies
- Media representatives
- Local community, voluntary and development groups
- State Agencies
- Sectoral interests including commercial operators and their representatives
- Schools and children

We are conscious that these groups of individual customers have different needs to be met and that their contacts with us can be through a number of means, including by letter, by fax, by e-mail, by telephone and by calling to one of our offices .We have examined these various contact points and we are now setting out the standards that our customers can expect to receive.

**Customers visiting our offices:-**

- We will be polite, courteous and fair in our dealings with you.
- We will respond to your query promptly and if we are unable to help you we will try to redirect you to someone who can.
- We will provide public offices that are clean, safe, economic and afford adequate privacy.
- We will be happy to facilitate you should you wish to conduct your business in Irish.

**Customers telephoning our offices:-**

- We will respond to your call promptly and will deal with your query in a polite and courteous manner.
- We will be helpful and provide as much information as possible.
- If we cannot deal with your query immediately we will call you back as quickly as possible.

**Customers writing to us:-**

- We will reply to your correspondence within 15 days.
- We will use technical and official terms only when absolutely necessary.
- We will ensure that all replies contain a contact name, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address.

### **Our Application Forms and Information Leaflets: -**

- We will ensure that information provided is relevant up to date and easily understood.
- We will seek from you only that information which is essential to a fair and prompt assessment of your application.
- We will ensure that our information leaflets and application forms are easy to understand and complete.

### **Service Requests:-**

- We will tell you when you can expect a response to your service request.
- We will deal with all requests promptly.
- We will deal with all requests in a fair and consistent manner.
- We will explain the basis for decisions made.
- We will advise you of your appeal rights.

### **Service Quality and Complaints:-**

- We will provide you with a good quality of service.
- We will encourage you to tell us about your experience of the Carlow Local Authorities and the service provided and will welcome your comments for service improvement and policy change.
- We will tell you about our complaints system and process any complaints made promptly and impartially.
- We will apologise for and seek to address any mistakes that we make.

## **SECTION 2**

### **PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE**

The following are the principles of quality customer service, which have been adopted by the local authorities and the means by which we plan to translate them into practical effect.

#### **(I) QUALITY SERVICE STANDARDS**

##### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE PROVISION OF HIGH QUALITY RELEVANT SERVICES IN AN OPEN AND RESPONSIVE MANNER**

In order to achieve this objective the local authorities are pursuing a dual approach. Firstly, increasing use is being made of multi-annual strategic plans for all our service areas. Through formal public consultation mechanisms and subsequent consideration and adoption by the elected members, these plans are designed to respond effectively to the needs of the community. They provide a clear picture of our service provision proposals in the years ahead for all our customers. Examples of service plans include 5 year Roads Plan, Traveller Accommodation Plan, Waste Management Plan, I.T. Development Strategy, Tourism Development Plan, Strategic Civic Vision, etc.

Secondly, we want to ensure that the services provided are of the best standard possible. To achieve this end, we have traditionally reviewed our services on an on-going basis and sought to secure improvements wherever possible. In order to render this exercise more meaningful for our customers, we are now adopting performance indicators in the main service areas.

These indicators will provide measurable values of the Council's performance, which can then be compared to our past performance and the performance of other local authorities, both nationally and internationally. Performance indicators will be supplemented with performance targets, whereby we set down in a precise and verifiable way the improvements we aim to achieve in the period ahead.

Details of performance indicators and targets are summarised in this Plan. Each year a report will be produced on the extent to which we achieve the targets set and the results analysed so as to identify and remedy problem areas. Performance indicators will help focus greater attention on the achievement of real improvements and encourage early adoption of methods of best practice.

#### **KEY ACTIONS**

**Increased use of multi-annual strategic service plans**

**Adoption of performance indicators and targets**

## **(II) EQUALITY / DIVERSITY**

### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AND TO CELEBRATE THE DIVERSITY WITHIN OUR COMMUNITY**

We wish to ensure that in our practices and procedures we do not discriminate on grounds of gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation or religious belief, age, disability, race or membership of the travelling community. We recognise that the increasing diversity of the community we serve is something to be valued and celebrated, with new cultural experiences to be shared to the benefit of all.

We, therefore, seek to operate practices and procedures that are based on the principles of equality and fairness. We seek to eliminate barriers to allow access to services for people experiencing disability, poverty or other forms of social exclusion. We will be proactive in this respect, identifying marginalised groups and devising specific proposals for service provision. In addition, through direct action and partnerships with voluntary and other statutory agencies we will promote a sharing of the knowledge and understanding of our diverse cultural experiences.

#### **KEY ACTIONS**

**Review procedures and documentation to eliminate discrimination**

**Devise specific policy responses for marginalised groups**

### **(III) PHYSICAL ACCESS**

#### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE IMPROVEMENT AND EXTENSION OF OUR PUBLIC OFFICE NETWORK**

We wish to ensure that not only are our public offices easily accessed by our customers, but that they are laid out and operated in a manner that gives expression to our desire to interact with the general public. The County Council offices at Athy Road, Carlow were upgraded in 1998 and a new Library Headquarters constructed at Tullow Street. These buildings in terms of layout and operation are designed to facilitate our customers in a practical and friendly manner.

Plans have also been prepared for the upgrading of our branch libraries, and it is anticipated that work will commence on the provision of new municipal offices for Carlow Urban District Council in 2001.

We also recognise the need to ensure that the geographical location is no barrier to public service access. Accordingly, plans have been prepared for the provision of one-stop shops at Muinebheag and Tullow and for rural information service points in Borris, Myshall and Hacketstown. The latter will assist members of the public in availing of information on the Council's and other public services, whereas the former will provide our customers with a local office at which they can conveniently avail of all Council services.

We aim, within the lifetime of the current Corporate Plan, to achieve a situation whereby all our public offices are of a sufficient standard to facilitate access for people with disabilities in an environment that ensures privacy and comfort for all customers as well as a safe and satisfying workplace for our staff.

**KEY ACTIONS**

**Further improve local authority offices**

**Establish one-stop shops and rural information points**

#### **(IV) INFORMATION**

##### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO PROVIDING OUR CUSTOMERS WITH UP TO DATE INFORMATION ON ALL OUR SERVICES AND OPERATIONS**

We wish to provide our customers with the information they require on the Council's services and operations. One of the main strengths of local authorities as organs of public service delivery is the extent to which they operate in an open and transparent manner. The proceedings at Council meetings are reported in detail in the local media, and numerous publications are issued each year, including budgetary proposals, annual financial reports, project plans, service plans and an annual report.

We wish to ensure that the information supplied is issued in a meaningful, timely and relevant manner, and accordingly will review our publications so as to ensure clarity and relevance. We are the first local authorities to issue our annual report on CD ROM and we will continue to avail of information technology developments for the effective dissemination of information.

We have also committed to issue of regular newsletters to all households within the county. Amongst our immediate additional proposals are the establishment of a comprehensive web-site and the introduction of rural information points. We will also review and improve our information leaflets, application forms and general documents relating to service criteria, so as to ensure that they are precise and easily understood.

We will continue to monitor the operation of Freedom of Information legislation so as to ensure not only that all requests are responded to promptly and correctly, but also to seek to provide as much information as possible to our customers, without the necessity of submitting a formal Freedom of Information request.

**KEY ACTIONS**

**Establish local authorities web-site.**

**Review application forms and information leaflets and issue  
regular newsletters**

**(V) TIMELINESS AND COURTESY**

**WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE PROMPT AND COURTEOUS  
DELIVERY OF SERVICES**

We wish to ensure that our services are delivered with consideration, sensitivity and minimum delay in a climate that fosters mutual respect between the local authorities and our customers. We will continue to operate all our public buildings in a manner that ensures prompt and personal attention to any individual attending our offices. We view each member of the public as a valued customer, and will respond to all queries in a helpful and confidential manner. All our front line staff will be trained in the principles of customer care and we will encourage feedback and comment on the quality of our frontline services.

A significant proportion of contact from our customers arises by way of telephone or postal communication, and we want to make sure that any customer so contacting the Council receive a good service. We will endeavour to respond to all written communications within a maximum period of fifteen days. Where it is not possible to issue a full response to the query a holding letter or acknowledgement will be issued. We also seek to ensure that telephone calls are answered within 30 seconds. Systems such as call queuing, direct inward dial, call forwarding, and messaging have been installed on our telephone network and their operation will be reviewed so as to ensure that they are efficient and customer friendly. In order to eliminate contact delays staff members will include details of name and direct telephone number on all correspondence issued.

**KEY ACTIONS**

**Customer care training for all front line staff**

**Establish and achieve communication response targets**

## **(VI) COMPLAINTS/APPEALS**

### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE INTRODUCTION AND OPERATION OF EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE COMPLAINTS/APPEAL SYSTEMS**

In this regard we have now published a detailed step by step guide for members of the public making complaints or appeals, where they are dissatisfied with the quality of service or nature of decisions made by the local authorities. We are conscious of the fact that large multi-functional organisations are often very good at devising and implementing major projects but can sometimes lose sight of the absolute importance of effectively responding to, what can be seen in comparison as, minor complaints.

Our complaint/appeal system will act as a simple barometer of our effectiveness in responding to issues, which are of critical importance to individual members of the public. We will ensure that our complaint and appeal system is monitored and reviewed so that necessary changes may be made promptly. Our desire is to ensure that our complaint/appeal system is well-publicised, transparent and simple to use and that it leads to real improvements in our responsiveness.

#### **KEY ACTION**

**Establish easy to use complaints system and review results regularly so as to better inform the decision making process**

## **(VII) CONSULTATION AND EVALUATION**

### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO LISTENING TO OUR CUSTOMERS AND ACTING IN RESPONSE TO THE VIEWS EXPRESSED**

Amongst the major strengths of the local government system are its closeness to the individual citizen and the many opportunities available for the expression of views and opinions. The primary mechanism for consultation is effected through the elected representatives of the public who adopt following detailed consideration and debate all of the policies pursued by the Council. This has traditionally being supplemented by formal (both statutory and non-statutory) consultations whereby the local authorities invite comments/submissions on proposed actions. It has also been supplemented by the views expressed through our partnerships with the many voluntary and community based organisations operating within the county. In recent years the Strategic Policy Committees established as part of the programme for local government reform provide a formal structure for the social partners and community groups to contribute to the preparation of local policies and strategies. The recently established County Development Board will also facilitate improved co-ordination of the actions of a broad range of bodies who promote the social, economic and cultural development of the county.

The Carlow local authorities welcome and encourage comments and input from all members of the public in relation to our actions and services. We have recently installed a customer suggestion facility at County Buildings and plan to extend same in all our public offices and on our web-site. All feedback received will be used to better inform service reviews and assist in making improvements to the services we provide.

### **KEY ACTIONS**

**Encourage expression of views on local authority activity and policies through the SPC'S ,CDB, and regular contacts with Community groups.**

**Encourage participation in public consultation mechanisms and establish customer suggestion facilities in all public offices.**

**Conduct customer surveys so as to identify areas for service improvement.**

## **(VIII) CHOICE**

### **WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE PROVISION OF THE MAXIMUM LEVEL OF CHOICE POSSIBLE IN THE DELIVERY OF OUR SERVICES**

We wish to maximise the level of choice available to our customers, both in terms of the nature of our services and the means by which such services are sought and delivered. In relation to the latter all our service departments will be happy to explore with our customers the nature of their particular need and the various responses that may be available thereto. For example, therefore, we encourage planning consultations so as to help identify the various options available to landowners prior to the submission of formal planning applications. Equally, our housing department is anxious to examine all social housing scheme options with any customer who has a particular housing need. We will continue to develop the principle of customer choice so as to promote better decision making and maximum customer involvement in the selection of responses to needs.

In relation to service availability, we recognise that our customers have increasingly extensive demands on their time. We will review and change our opening hours and service delivery times/ locations to facilitate our customers. Improvements have already been made in our public library service and further improvements are planned for other service areas. We will also avail of new technologies wherever increased choice may be obtained, and will in all cases publicly promote the various choices available.

We will continue and extend where appropriate the use of prepaid envelopes and free phone telecommunications in the operation of our services.

## **KEY ACTIONS**

**Promote dialogue with our customers in the selection of service responses**

**Review and improve opening hours**

**Review and simplify service application mechanisms**

**(IX) OFFICIAL LANGUAGES POLICY**

**WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE PROMOTION OF THE IRISH  
LANGUAGE IN THE DELIVERY OF OUR SERVICES**

The Carlow local authorities are anxious to ensure that all customers can avail of our services in Irish, English or bilingual. In this regard we have recently recruited a special Irish Language Officer so as to promote effective use of the Irish language throughout the organisations. We will review all of our publications, application forms and information leaflets so as to incorporate adequate bilingual representation.

**KEY ACTION**

**Promote the use of the Irish language in the local authorities.**

**(X) BETTER CO-ORDINATION**

**WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF MAXIMUM CO-ORDINATION IN THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES**

We recognise that the geographical and functional divisions of responsibility between the Carlow local authorities are difficult to comprehend and of limited relevance to the public we serve. We will seek to foster a co-ordinated and integrated approach to the delivery and operation of our public services so that any member of the public contacting any of the three authorities will be provided with relevant and helpful information on the service sought. We will also seek to ensure the pursuit of a common approach in terms of procedures and policies and strive for maximum efficiencies through joint actions and agency work based on the specific strengths of each authority. Our aim is to minimise inefficiencies, duplication and any contradictions of approach while retaining the independent status of each elected body. Through our One Stop Shops and service integration proposals we are seeking to achieve a situation where our customer can avail of local authority services at any of our offices.

**KEY ACTIONS**

**Promote the adoption of common approaches by the Carlow local authorities and seek to integrate services where greater efficiency and improved customer service can be achieved.**

**(XI) INTERNAL CUSTOMER**

**WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE RECOGNITION OF OUR STAFF AND MEMBERS BOTH AS SERVICE PROVIDERS AND CONSUMERS**

We recognise and value our staff and members both as service providers and internal customers of the authorities. We seek to provide adequate support to our staff and members in relation to all service delivery issues. The development of an ethos of customer care will form an integral part of the Authorities training plans. We will also continue to acknowledge our employees as a valuable resource and their views and ideas availed of in relation to customer service delivery issues. Recent developments including the establishment of the partnership and corporate review fora will be expanded and built upon and renewed emphasis given to the provision of the necessary supports to enable our elected members fulfil their democratic roles.

**KEY ACTIONS**

**Encourage staff input into local authority policy responses**

**Review of elected members support mechanisms including**

**Training and information**





<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Performance Indicators (I) And Targets (T)</b>	<b>Implementation date or Target to be achieved by 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2002</b>
<b>Corporate Health</b>	% of days lost through sickness (I)	
<b>Revenue Collection</b>	House rent – amount collected at year end (I) As a percentage of amount due. Percentage of arrears : (I) 1/3 weeks old 4/6 weeks old more than 6 weeks old. House repayments – amount collected at year end as a percentage of amount due. (I) Percentage of arrears : (I) 1/3 weeks old 4/6 weeks old more than 6 weeks old Annual target date for issue of – (T) Metered water charge demands Non metered water charge demands Commercial rates	<b>1 May &amp; 1 Nov.</b> <b>1 March</b> <b>1 April</b>
<b>Planning</b>	Percentage of applications determined within 8 weeks (I) Percentage of further information requests (I) Average time taken to determine applications (I) % of applications granted, refused and appealed to An Bord Pleanála (I) Percentage of decisions upheld by An Bórd Pleanála (I)	
<b>Library Services</b>	Library Membership (T) Number of items issued (T) Date for establishment of service to housebound (T) Date for placement of library catalogue on WEB (T) Date for computerisation of Muinebheag Library (T) Attendance at special events (I) Average number of public opening hours (I) Number of research queries (I)	<b>15,000</b> <b>160,000</b> <b>April 2002</b> <b>April 2002</b>  <b>April 2002</b>

## **Appendix 2**

### **COMPLAINTS / APPEALS PROCEDURES**

The Carlow Local Authorities are anxious to learn about any case where a customer received a poor service or inadequate response. On occasion we may make mistakes in the operation of our services or the standard of services provided might not be to the high level that our customers expected or the local authority would have wished. Where this happens we want to know so that we can apologise and explain the situation, remedy the matter if possible and implement whatever changes are necessary to ensure that the particular problem does not recur. Accordingly we welcome feedback on all our activities whether by way of general comment or formal complaint.

The local authorities operate a simple complaints procedure which is designed to deal with cases where customers feel that they have not been dealt with in accordance with our customer service principles or where we have failed to honour our customer service commitments. Examples might include failure to respond to queries or service requests promptly, failure to provide relevant information, failure to deal with requests in a polite and courteous manner, failure to be consistent in our decisions, failure to provide reasons for decisions when sought, failure to advise of appeal rights etc. The complaints system should also be used where a customer feels that the service provided has not been satisfactory in qualitative or quantitative terms. Examples might include failure to undertake repair/improvement work to an adequate standard or failure to honour our commitments in relation to water, street cleaning, public lighting etc.

There are also a range of statutory appeal mechanisms available whereby a customer can appeal the decision of the authorities (eg planning decisions, freedom of information decisions, environmental matters etc). We are committed to providing our customers with all relevant information on the operation of these appeals systems.



## **HOW AND TO WHOM SHOULD ONE COMPLAIN:-**

1. In the first instance a person should contact the service area to which the complaint relates (If you are unsure of the appropriate office to contact our reception or general office will be happy to assist you). We will be happy to receive complaints made in person, by telephone, by fax, by e-mail or by general correspondence. On occasion, for example due to complexity of the issues involved, it may be necessary to request the complaint be made in writing. The member of staff who receives the complaint in the relevant service area will try to resolve the matter himself/herself. You are asked to supply as much information as possible at the outset as this will help us in our desire to reach a decision on the matter quickly. The member of staff will inform you of the outcome at the earliest possible date.
2. If you are not satisfied with the response issued you can request to have the matter referred to the Department Head. It will not be necessary for you to resubmit your complaint again but it would be helpful if you could give the reasons for which you are not satisfied with the response issued. The Department Head will review the matter completely and issue a response at an early date.
3. If you are still not satisfied with the local authority response you can have the matter referred to the County Secretary or Town Clerk. Complaints so referred should be in writing. Upon receipt the County Secretary or Town Clerk will have the matter fully investigated including the how the issue was dealt with at Departmental level. The County Secretary or Town Clerk will issue a written response to the complaint as quickly as possible.

**The Local Authorities are committed to the issue of a response to all service queries and complaints within 15 days. Where this is not possible we will give you an indication of when you can expect to receive a reply.**

4. If you are not satisfied with the local authority response to your complaint you may lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. The Office of the Ombudsman is an independent agency established to deal with cases of mal-administration within certain public bodies. A complaint may be lodged with the Ombudsman's office at any time and it is not a pre-requisite that you exhaust all local complaint mechanisms first.
  
5. The address for the Ombudsman is:-

Office of the Ombudsman,  
18 Lower Lesson Street,  
Dublin 2.  
Tel. no.-01 6785222  
Fax no-016610570

**The Council wishes to reassure people that any person who makes a  
complaint will not be treated unfavourably as a  
result of having made such a complaint**

