

## **SECTION 6: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES**

6.1 The quality service approach

6.2 A particular initiative in setting standards: The Urban Re-development Authority experience

## **6.1 The quality service approach**

In this section, we discuss the Service Improvement Unit (SIU). The programme "Public Service for the 21st Century" or "PS21 " has already been discussed in Section 3.

### **The context for change**

The SIU was established as a result of two major considerations:

- (i) The concern of some MPs about the standard of service given by government agencies to the public. They urged the government to set up an independent supervisory body to monitor and assess the quality of public services and to process public feedback, complaints and suggestions.
- (ii) The government's policy of providing the highest possible quality service to its customers at an affordable price. A supervisory body independent of the public service would help monitor, assess, and improve the quality of service provided by government departments and statutory boards.

The two considerations led to the formulation of the SIU in April 1991. The basic rationale was to set up an agency that would have the manpower and authority to monitor, audit, and assess the quality of service provided by government departments and statutory boards, and to recommend measures for improvement. It was also a realisation that public sector quality management must start with the provision of the highest standard of quality service possible.

### **Implementing change**

The SIU consists of a group of civil servants under the supervision of a political committee of MPs and community leaders.

While the Unit works to enhance the awareness of service quality at all levels of the public sector and to sell the importance of quality service, the responsibility for delivering quality service lies ultimately with the operating ministries and statutory boards. The onus of setting, publishing, reviewing, and improving service standards lies squarely with the public sector organisations.

The SIU also provides a mechanism for customers to register their complaints or field their suggestions, and obtain redress (where appropriate) with regard to service

provided by government agencies. It looks into every complaint or suggestion brought forth by the public and ensures that the relevant agency replies to the customer and makes the necessary rectification/change where this is meaningful. It also channels public feedback to the government agencies for action. Such feedback helps the agencies improve their service quality.

The SIU's first year plan included measures to increase organisational efficiency and effectiveness, and to monitor the performance of ministries and statutory boards as well as public feedback.

Following that, Quality Service Managers (often the second in command in a ministry or statutory board) were appointed and Quality Steering Committees were formed in all ministries, major departments and statutory boards. The functions of the Quality Service Managers (QSMS) include defining and disseminating service visions, developing service standards and monitoring service quality within their organisations. The public has direct access to QSMS and their names appear in the national telephone directory as well as the Singapore government telephone directory. Quality Steering Committees, on the other hand, set the direction for the Quality Service Programme in each organisation. They help to integrate the various efforts and programmes which aim to improve productivity and public contact.

With a well laid-out approach, the SIU went about doing its job immediately. Co-ordination and planning were precise and all relevant departments had no problems in appointing the QSMS and in setting up the Quality Steering Committees. Within the first year of its formation, the SIU managed to achieve tremendous results in improving the standard of service to the public.

The strategies adopted by the SIU since 1991 have been to:

- (i) increase organisational efficiency and effectiveness;
- (ii) maximise the use of human resources;
- (iii) maximise the use of information technology and automation;
- (iv) monitor the performance of ministries and statutory boards;
- (v) monitor public feedback;
- (vi) make suggestion for improvements;
- (vii) make site visits to see for itself how ministries/departments are faring.

Another strategy was the development of service indicators. Improving quality management means identifying first the areas for improvement. Two sets of indicators were established:

**(i) *Unique Service Indicators***

These are indicators deemed important by the individual government departments and statutory boards. The organisations set their own indicators and standards to gauge the level of satisfaction to the public. Such service indicators are applicable only to a particular function within a particular organisation.

**(ii) *Generic Service Indicators***

Generic service indicators are necessary for the SIU to assess the level of service provided on a broad scale and to compare the performance of different organisations in a meaningful way.

Since the formation of SIU, several significant developments have taken root in the public service:

- The formation of more one-stop service centres, essentially to increase customers' access to public services;
- The regular review of rules and regulations, to reduce red-tape to the minimum;
- The provision of better service over the counter through training and incentive schemes;
- The promotion of cashless/electronic/telephone transactions;
- The establishment of QSM hotlines;
- Publicity about centres of excellence in the Civil Service;
- Strengthening of the organisation's will to provide better service;
- Continuous search for improvements.

The SIU provided the leadership to coax or encourage service-oriented change and to get ministries and departments to be more positive to public feedback. Many departments have set service targets as a result of SIU encouragement while others have shortened processing times. For example, the issue of work permits has been

speeded up and the public can now make applications for passports through the post.

The SIU works quietly and its political support lends confidence to changes initiated and helps clear blockages in the Civil Service hierarchy to good effect.

## **6.2 A particular initiative in improving the quality of services: the Urban Redevelopment Authority experience**

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is one of the statutory boards under the Ministry of National Development. As the national planning and conservation authority, URA's mission is to plan, facilitate and regulate the physical development of Singapore into a tropical city of excellence.

To discharge its functions, URA has five line divisions, one of which is the Development Control Division (DCD). This paper documents the DCD experience in improving its standard of service through standard setting.

### **The context for change**

DCD is a regulatory arm of URA. Its role is to ensure that development proposals from both the private and public sectors comply with planning intentions and guidelines. DCD was the pioneer division in URA in standard setting as it is one of the divisions with a large external customer base of developers and architects.

Thousands of businesses require URA's approval for altering buildings, constructing new ones and changing the use of any building. DCD processes about 9,300 development applications each year. Its decisions can affect the commitment of millions of dollars in public and private funds. Before 1989, there were long delays in the processing of applications. DCD took an average of 15 weeks to process a development application. In September 1989, there were more than 1,000 applications on hand, of which 400 or 39% were more than eight weeks' old. Many complaints on the delays were received. It was against this backdrop that a commitment was made by the management to improve the standard of service delivered by DCD.

### **Implementing change**

To steer the Division towards improving its standard of service to its customers, the foremost requirement is genuine commitment from senior management. Management initiated a Service Excellence Programme (SEP) in DCD.

At the start of the programme, a customer perception survey was conducted. The survey confirmed that customers perceived that URA was slow in processing development applications. The customers' expectation of reasonable times for processing applications is shown in Table 1:

Table 1

| Type of Application   | What respondents perceived as a reasonable time for the whole approval process |             |
|---|--|-------------|
|   | Average  | Minimum     |
| Development   | 8 – 9 weeks  | 3 weeks     |
| Additions and alterations to existing buildings (residential) | 3 – 4 weeks  | 1 – 2 weeks |
| Change of use of existing premises                            | 1 – 2 weeks  |             |

As a step closer towards meeting customers’ expectations, the management decided to set the following interim targets for the clearance of the different types of application DCD receives:

| Type of Application   | Target  |
|---|---|
| Development   | 90% of cases to be cleared in less than 8 weeks |
| Additions and alterations to existing buildings (residential) | 90% of cases to be cleared in less than 6 weeks |
| Change of use of existing premises                            | 90% of cases to be cleared in less than 7 weeks |

The main elements of the Service Excellence Programme in DCD were:

**(a) *Instilling a customer service culture***

No service improvement programme can succeed unless it is backed by a team of committed people. Service quality training and workshops aimed at instilling service quality skills, attitude and behaviour in staff were organised for staff.

All new staff joining DCD had to undergo a DCD induction programme covering all aspects of DCD work, including the service quality culture.

Staff who received compliments were given recognition through a letter of commendation from their Director and publicity in the in-house newsletter.

***(b) Getting feedback and monitoring customers' satisfaction***

To improve the standard of service delivered to URA's customers, a Customer Service Unit was set up to keep track of customer feedback and monitor customer satisfaction. This was done through quarterly customer perception surveys and the setting up of a tracking system to capture incoming letters of complaints, compliments, appeals and enquiries. Learning points are derived for organisational improvement.

Besides monitoring customers' feedback through surveys, correspondence and public enquiries, frequent dialogues were also organised with professional bodies and other government departments to iron out planning any development issues.

***(c) Improving work procedures***

To speed up application-processing time, "express lanes" were set up for simple applications. Staff were also given greater decision-making power where appropriate.

Case management was enhanced with the use of a computerised Development Application Management Information System (DAMIS). This proactive case management system allows staff to obtain advance notification of cases received. Through this system, the progress of individual applications can also be tracked throughout the approval process to ensure the quickest possible response time. To speed up the conveyance of decisions, more machinery such as tax equipment was purchased. An electronic queuing system was also installed to provide faster and better counter service.

Annex A lists the chronology of steps taken in this programme.

**Staff acceptance**

At the initial phase of the programme, staff resistance towards the emphasis on meeting the standards set was perceptible. However, this was gradually overcome through visible support from management such as increasing manpower and providing the necessary office equipment, and through acquainting staff with the need for better customer service through customer awareness training.

## Performance – key deliverables

The benefits of the commitment to service improvement were apparent. In 1989, the average time to process each application was close to four months. By July 1992, all targets set were met (see Annex B). In July 1995, the processing time, with revised targets, had improved further as shown in Table III:

Table III

| Type of Applications  | Target  | Actual as at July 1995 |
|---|---|------------------------|
| Development   | 90% of cases cleared in less than 8 weeks           | 96%                    |
| Additions and alterations to existing buildings (residential) | 90% of cases cleared in less than 5 weeks (revised) | 96%                    |
| Change of use of existing premises                            | 90% of cases cleared in less than 6 weeks (revised) | 95%                    |

Survey findings reflect an improvement in the level of customer satisfaction since 1991, when the first survey was carried out (see Annex C). The two service factors most important to customers, speed of processing and responsiveness of service, have improved from an average rating of 2.9 and 3.5 respectively in July 1991 to 3.7 and 4.2 in March 1995. In the 4th Quarter 1994 survey, 61% of the respondents "strongly agreed that DCD's overall level of service is excellent", compared with 52% in the 1st Quarter 1992.

The number of complaints received had also decreased and compliments received gradually rose (see Annex D). In 1992, 230 complaints and 27 compliments were received. In 1994, 78 complaints and 35 compliments were received.

The Technical Enquiry Service, set up to handle general public enquiries on development control matters, showed increased consultation between customers and DCD. When the service was first made available in August 1991, a total of 102 enquiries (62 face-to-face discussions and 40 telephone calls) were received. This service has grown to be an extremely popular channel for DCD-public communication with 2,143 enquiries (590 face-to-face discussions and 1,553 telephone calls) as at July 1995.

## **Conclusion**

Being a non-profit organisation with regulatory responsibilities does not make delivering quality service impossible. The experience in DCD has illustrated that service standards in the public sector can be set and improved with management commitment. Following the DCD experience, the URA management has extended the Service Excellence Programme to the rest of the organisation. The challenge ahead is not only to meet customers' needs but also to exceed their expectations. Higher standards will have to be set in line with rising expectations.

### Strategy (in phases) for the SEP in DCD

The general thrust of the improvement programme that DCD adopted is:

#### Phase I May 89 – December 90

- Focus – Set time targets for processing development applications
- Clear backlog
- Put in resources

#### Phase II December 90 – June 92

- Focus – Instil customer service culture
- Review approach to processing
- Set up Customer Service Unit

#### Phase III June 92 – June 95

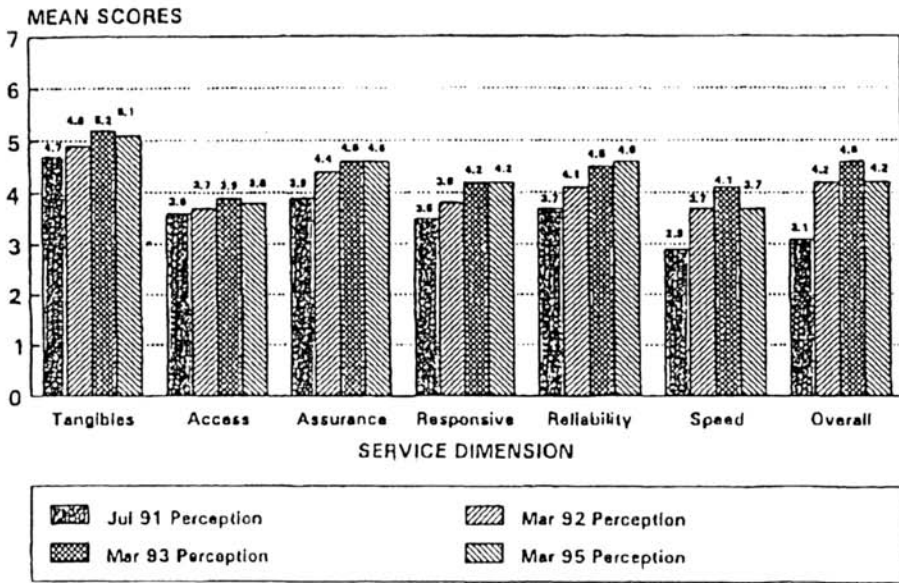
- Focus – Computerisation/Automation
- Policy and Procedure Review

In Phase 1, from May 1989 to December 1990, DCD set application clearance targets, increased its resources and cleared its backlog of applications. Phase Two, from January 1991 to June 1992, built on these gains by instilling a customer-driven culture among staff, raising performance targets, improving services and reviewing processing methods. A Development Application Management Information System was also introduced in Phase Two. Phase Three of the programme focuses on the introduction of more efficient computer systems, and will include further reviews of policies and procedures.

**TARGETS SET – TARGETS ACHIEVED**

| Type of Application     | Target                    | Actual in 1989/90 | Actual as at July 92 |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Development             | 90% in less than 8 weeks  | 81,6% (Dec 89)    | 91%                  |
| Additions & Alterations | 90% in less than 6 weeks  | 78.9% (May 90)    | 100%                 |
| Change of Use           | 90 % in less than 7 weeks | 55.6% (May 90)    | 93%                  |
| Legal Requisition       | 90% in less than 2 weeks  | 12.8%             | 98%                  |

### COMPARISON OF MEAN SCORES FOR SERVICE QUALITY FACTORS (PROFESSIONALS)



1st Quarter 1995

## Annex C-2

|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| Tangibles      | : | Physical evidence of quality  |
| Access         | : | Ease of contacting DCD staff and ease of obtaining information                          |
| Assurance      | : | Competence and ability of DCD staff in instilling trust and confidence in the customers |
| Reliability    | : | Consistency and dependability of DCD's service, decisions and policies/guidelines       |
| Responsiveness | : | Giving prompt and personalised attention to the customers                               |
| Speed          | : | Time taken to process applications  |

### TREND OF COMPLIMENTS & COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

