

Putting the Customer First

the quality assurance framework for business support providers

Issue 2: February 2005

Experience of using UK government services improves for small businesses



By Ruth Rajkumar & Andrew Thomas, BMRB Social Research, a division of BMRB International

The Government Action Plan (GAP) for Small Business sets out an ambitious agenda for improving the provision of government services for small businesses. By applying a better understanding of small businesses' needs to policymaking and service delivery, the Government can promote further small business success.

BMRB Social Research was commissioned in 2004 by the Small Business Service to undertake a small study exploring small businesses' experiences of interacting with government services. The researchers talked to 18 businesses, selected to reflect a mix of business sectors, ownership, size, age and the type of dealings they had with government services.

Overall, services provided to small businesses by government funded services were seen to have improved over the past four years. Improvements included greater emphasis on tailoring information and the quality of advice and training to the individual business.

The Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise were highlighted as providers of very high quality and accessible training opportunities. They were identified as having staff who were approachable, knowledgeable, responsive and who kept the customer informed of progress. Respondents particularly liked their emphasis on providing a single point of communication, easier access to information and advice through help lines and web sites, fast response times, one-to-one advice and consultancy and locally based sources of information and advice.

While Government funded services were viewed in a positive light, some suggested improvements could be made these included

- improvements in staff knowledge and the consistency of information and advice offered
- services to go further in meeting business needs
- decision times to be reduced
- compliance costs to be minimised and applied flexibly where possible
- realistic information and advice to be made available about finance and grants

The full-published report is available on www.sbs.gov.uk and commissioned to supplement a mapping study of support for small business in England. Both studies were commissioned to assist in taking forward theme six of the GAP 'Improving small businesses experiences of government services.'

WELCOME



A warm welcome to the latest edition of the Customer First UK business support newsletter. The newsletter has been designed to keep all our key stakeholders, partners and business support providers up to date and informed of the latest developments in business support and service quality as well as national Customer First plans and activities.

The newsletter is produced three times a year but backed up and supported by our website www.customerfirst.org.

This newsletter explores the recent research commissioned by the SBS, examining the service quality of government services to business, it provides practical examples and case studies of providers that have been working towards Customer First and provides the latest updates on a number of quality assurance frameworks and standards used across the public sector. The newsletter also provides an overview of some of the capacity building materials, activities and events available to providers that want to further develop their people and their organisations.

We are always interested in the views and feedback of partners – so if you have any comments or questions about this newsletter or any other aspect of the work of Customer First UK please complete the feedback form enclosed with this newsletter or alternatively give me a ring on 0845 226 0719.

We look forward to your feedback and continuing to work with you to raise the standards and capacity of our business support industry.

Hannah Brindle
Chief Executive
Customer First UK



Customer First UK
Limited

The Customer First Framework



Putting the Customer First is the quality assurance framework for providers and deliverers of business support services.

The Customer First framework has been designed and developed by a wide range of business support providers and funding organisations and has been based on extensive research of business customers and their service needs.

The standard examines the customer and their interface with and experience of a business support provider and the services directly delivered to them. The standard covers three key areas:

'Customer First has helped us transform our business'

by Afzal Akram, Managing Director of Deltaclub Group and Chairman of Business Link for London



When Deltaclub Group committed to the Putting the Customer First quality assurance framework in January 2004, we provided networking events, outreach and signposting services through LearnDirect and support to help the unemployed return to work. At the time we recognised the benefits in working in partnership with providers in the London Business Support Network (LBSN) to deliver publicly funded programmes and as such we were keen to

demonstrate that Deltaclub delivered a quality assured service. As Managing Director of Deltaclub and as the Chairman of Business Link for London, I felt that we should be leading by example.

Customer Relationships - examines how business support providers build relationships with their business customers.

Market Awareness - looks at a business support provider's approach to understanding their market.

People - focuses on the people delivering services within a business support organisation.

The Framework has been rolled out in Yorkshire and in London and is currently being piloted on a national basis. It is used to assess the full range of business support provision

The following case study provides an insight into how the Customer First Framework is having an impact on an organisation and its customers, from the perspective of a London based learndirect Centre.

When we went for assessment, we recognised that we were doing a lot of things well but equally there were areas, particularly in our customer management processes, that required some development and improvement. The Customer First framework and assessment process not only helped us to identify these areas but helped us to think creatively about new ways of doing things that would have a positive impact on our clients. As a result of the process, we have experienced unprecedented benefits, including an increase from 2 full-time staff and a turnover of £50,000 in March 2003 to 20 full-time staff and a forecast turnover of £700,000 in March 2005.

We feel that the growth of our business is fundamentally linked to our engagement with Putting the Customer First because it has helped us to formalise our business plan and put in processes to support our expansion. It has also offered the means to recruit the right staff to fulfil the needs of our customers and expand our service offer into mainstream training provision.

In less than a year, Putting the Customer First has helped us to transform our business, proving that it doesn't matter how small or informal you are, you will benefit from the impact that going through this process will have on your business and your customers.

Learning and Skills Councils evaluate impact of the Framework on Training Providers and Colleges

The National LSC and the LSCs in Yorkshire and the Humber, Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire have published findings from over 40 funded Training Providers and Colleges, evaluating their experiences in working towards Customer First and identifying how providers performed against the Framework.

The LSCs set out to measure the extent to which the Customer First Framework could support providers to meet the requirements of the new national skills strategy, measure and improve business support provision to business customers and build capability and capacity to improve the experience of business customers.

The main findings of the report concluded that:

- The main areas where providers performed well were in market awareness and people and the main area where providers performed less well was customer relationships
- Providers perceived that there were many benefits to be gained from working towards the Customer First process both for their organisation and for their customers with over 90% of providers identifying a range of direct benefits

- In total 98% of providers identified a number of significant areas where the framework would have a medium to long-term impact on their business and where the framework would better support them to meet the growing national and regional agenda for better employer engagement

For a copy of the Executive Summary of the evaluation findings please visit the newsletter section of the Customer First website, www.customerfirst.org

Raising Service Standards

Taking Customer First Forward

To date nearly 400 different business support providers have committed to and are working towards achieving the Customer First Framework. Currently nearly 200 providers are fully compliant against the standard.

Customer First has been rolled out across providers of business support in Yorkshire and the Humber and in London and is being piloted nationally.

We are also working and liaising with a range of other organisations including Learning and Skills Councils, BLU, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of England and Wales and a number of other regional and sub-regional agencies

For more information on our roll-out plans please contact Hannah Brindle at Customer First on [0845 226 0719](tel:08452260719).

The Owner Manager Friendly Standards Mean Business

SFEDI is a not for profit, leading practice, standards-setting and endorsement body with a board and advisory groups led by entrepreneurs.

SFEDI was formed in 1996 to improve the quality of training, coaching, mentoring and advice available to owner managers and entrepreneurs and to develop standards for them to help them survive and thrive.

Since then, at least 1.3 million people starting and running small businesses in the UK have benefited from the learning, skills and business support available, underpinned by SFEDI standards.

Raising the Standards for Enterprise Development

SFEDI has individual competence standards for prospective and existing owner managers/entrepreneurs covering Exploring Enterprise; Business Start Up and Business Improvement. New, bespoke standards include those in Business Development for social enterprises and in Retail for small and micro stores.

Look for the small business friendly logo!



SFEDI has also developed leading practice covering all areas of entrepreneur/owner manager learning and the type and quality of support they need. After consideration by a SFEDI evaluation panel, qualifications, training programmes, websites, journals, learning media and networks that meet the SFEDI standards and practice guidelines can all be stamped with the SFEDI endorsement logo. This is increasingly recognised by prospective and existing owner managers as a symbol of quality.

For further information, Tony Robinson, Executive Chairman of SFEDI can be contacted on tony.robinson@sfedi.co.uk

Charter Mark – Revised, Reorganised and Re-launched



Charter Mark, the Government's national standard for excellence in customer service, has entered a new era in its long history of improving public services. Following the re-launch, last year, the aim of Charter Mark has been to grow the scheme beyond its original status as a prize for the elite of the public sector and widen take up - encouraging its use in areas where it will make an impact on services that matter most to the public.

Since the re-launch, the number of Charter Mark holders has grown to over 2,500 organisations, including health bodies, the courts service, Jobcentreplus and the education sector. Although each provider has a different story to tell, they have all found practical ways of implementing effective customer service to the individual citizen. In particular these providers have demonstrated their effectiveness in listening to their customers, learning from customers and delivering the service their customers want.

For further information and access to a free self assessment tool on Charter Mark – please log on to the Cabinet Office site, www.chartermark.gov.uk

Investors in People – Launch of the New Standard

A new version of the business improvement tool, the Investors in People Standard, which helps organisations enhance their performance by developing their people, has now been launched. The updated Standard places new emphasis on employee involvement and on maximising their potential. The review has been designed to ensure the Standard continues to offer relevant support to employers of all sectors and sizes, both those new to the Standard and those already using the principles.

The key changes include;

- The structure of the standard changes from four principles to three with 'Commitment' now implicit and demonstrated by the evidence of outputs required in all other areas.
- Greater implied emphasis on culture following the addition of an indicator about involvement and 'empowerment' and several references to consultation with representative groups about specific business processes.
- The 'management capability' aspect of the Standard and the planning and evaluation indicators have been strengthened.

The previous version of the Standard will remain available for those wishing to be assessed against that version until 31 December 2005.

For more information on the new Standard, contact your local Business Link or Learning and Skills Council or visit the Investors in People UK website at www.investorsinpeople.co.uk

Capacity Building

On-line Business Development Resources Making a Difference



Since Customer First UK launched the range of on-line capacity building resources last October, business support providers have been using these case studies, fact sheets and business templates to support their development and continuous improvement as they work towards achieving the Customer First Framework.

Originally designed to support business development needs, including how to handle enquiries, how to gather customer feedback and how to recruit the right people, providers have been using these tools to put practical processes and systems in place to deliver a more effective and consistent customer service.



Invest Business Training Solutions, at Hull College, achieved compliance last November. Judith Warnes, from Invest, found this wealth of on-line information to be of real help;

“We were struggling to understand how we could practically measure the impact that our service had on our customers. But by referring to the on-line case study from a similar organisation and using the practical fact sheet on impact assessment we were able to understand how we could effectively measure and use impact data in our business. We now have an effective and robust system in place to really understand the difference we make to the performance of our business customers”

Since the launch last October of these on-line resources, Customer First UK has supported over 100 different providers to further develop and improve their approach to delivering services to business customers. For further information on how to subscribe and access these capacity building tools please visit the Customer First website – www.customerfirst.org

BLU: Building Capacity in Business Support



As more and more professionals in the business support sector are discovering, BLU is ideally placed to help us enhance our skills portfolio. By doing so, BLU moves

closer to its own ultimate goal of helping to create a common sense of purpose and team spirit across the small business development value chain.

BLU works with professionals from right across the business support network, providing learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities in specific fields like mentoring, leadership, customer orientation, valuing businesses and market segmentation. And it facilitates networking between organisations and regions.

BLU's current work includes

- collaborative approaches to small firms policy development
- a content-rich extranet that offers business support professionals a powerful tool for collaborative work and idea-exchange

- training for service providers to enable them to deliver the services promised by the BL brand
- a learning programme that addresses key capability issues including leadership and sharing good practice
- Subject Action Teams (SATs), which work on improving the impact of investments in business support and sharing good practice
- the Tomorrow's Leaders Programme – developing a cadre of business support leaders
- a set of tools and resources (Project in a Box) to help project managers set up and run successful collaborative projects
- a knowledge management strategy that will exploit knowledge assets to the benefit of the SME customer

For more information on BLU's work either call the BLU Helpline now on 0845 001 0030 or visit www.blu-horizons.com.

Assessment Hints and Tips

Customer First – A University View

David Williamson, The School Business Associate at
University of Bradford School of Management.



If you are considering Customer First, or have recently committed to working with it, you will probably have a multitude of questions. Why are we really doing this, how long will it really take, and importantly the 'me factor' - just how much work will there be for me - really? Breathe a sigh of relief, you are not alone. We had similar questions here at the University just 18 months ago when we first embarked on our Customer First 'journey.'

I call it a journey as we have come a long way in a relatively short time. Initially we had no real benchmark – there were no other organisations as large as the University working with the framework at the time, or if they were, it was on a department basis. We realised quite early on that we would need to create our own approaches, especially as we took the view that we should aim to be assessed as an entire University. So, here's the first tip, speak to other organisations, make the most of the CF Networking events and listen to what others have found works well.

We also wanted to avoid the department-by-department approach often adopted in achieving standards, which although would have been easier to project manage, might have meant a wait of several years before being fully compliant. Why do things by halves? Tip number two – consider if you want be assessed as an entire organisation or as a unit/s. You might be well advised to bite the bullet and plan to be assessed for all areas that come into scope.

With over 150 people linked to varying degrees in business support activity, planning was therefore going to be vital if we were to achieve compliance by early 2005. Those of you working in HE and FE will be acutely aware that even the best plans can get snarled up in the slow moving cogs of University machines.

Thankfully we had the full support of our Vice Chancellor and found this to be highly useful in moving things forward. We also had a highly enthusiastic steering group each taking responsibility for delivering on identified tasks. So tip number three – create enthusiasm, try and bring advocates on board and don't even consider CF without senior management support.

This is where I make a confession. The University is currently partially compliant. After a lot of planning in 2003 and early 2004 we had our first assessment in March 2004 to find we didn't quite make the grade. There was obvious disappointment after all our hard work, but actually it has kept us on our toes.

There are plenty more tips, anecdotes and 'do's' and 'don'ts' to pass on, but the point I am trying to make is that we are not seeing Customer First as a 'badge' we must get at all costs, rather a process that has enabled us to take a long and hard look at ourselves and help us become more joined up and focused in the way we work with our customers. We also feel we have developed approaches that could benefit colleagues working in other HE and FE institutions and we are happy to share what we have learned.

It's not an easy ride, so there's no point trying to say it doesn't require planning and effort, but it will be worthwhile, revealing, and dare I say it ... enjoyable. I wish you success on your Customer First journey.

For a copy of the full article please visit the News section on the Customer First website, www.customerfirst.org

Taking the fear out of your assessment...



Sue Lightburn, a Customer First Assessor from
the assessment body QED Consulting

Facing your forthcoming assessment against the Customer First framework can often seem a daunting task and as the assessment day fast approaches, it may seem positively nerve-racking! What will the assessor be like? What will they want to see? How does this process work?

To help you overcome some of those uneasy feelings, here are a few helpful tips and hints to help you to survive and benefit.

Self-assessment process

- Who do you need to involve? Think about who you need to involve, from business planning, marketing and HR.
- Agree a process
- Identify evidence
- Rate yourself – being honest not brutal!
- Share your findings, identify gaps and put an action plan in place

Evidence

- Does not need to be based on procedures or paper-based. It can be an agreed way of working
- Is it relevant ?
- Is effective, robust, and consistent across your organisation

- Is it sufficient to meet the requirements of the Statement?

And finally...

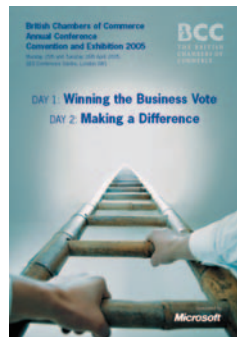
Your assessor

- Is on your side. They do want to work with you through the assessment process
- They want you to succeed and benefit from the Customer First framework and the process
- They want to hear about your approach and will encourage you to tell them about it
- They are definitely not the enemy!

Reassure your staff that the assessor will not test them. The assessor simply wants you to explain what your organisation does and how it delivers services and support to your business customers.

Conferences & Events

British Chamber of Commerce Annual Conference



The British Chambers of Commerce Annual Conference, Business Convention and Exhibition - Monday 25th and Tuesday 26th of April 2005, QEII Conference Centre, London SW1, supported by Microsoft.

This is a must attend event for all businesses and those with an interest in business support, international trade, and skills.

Delegates will find this year's conference is an unrivalled opportunity to put questions to key decision makers as it is likely to fall during the election campaign. The event also features a large business convention and exhibition allowing excellent networking opportunities and the chance to gain valuable business support information and advice.



For further information contact Liz Parkin on 020 7324 4365, e-mail liz.parkin@neilstewartassociates.co.uk

Charter Mark Workshops



A popular series of half-day workshops delivered by CMPS enable potential applicants and others to explore the usefulness of

Charter Mark to their organisation. For more information please visit www.cmcs.gov.uk/chmk

Awards Ceremony – London

Putting the Customer First is the quality assurance framework for the delivery partners of the London Business Support Network (LBSN), with over 70 providers now compliant. To celebrate the achievements of those providers who have achieved Putting the Customer First during 2004/05, an event will be held on the evening of 16 February and facilitated by CragRats Action Training. For more details, please contact Karen Ruse on 01920 487444 or karen@karenruse.com.

Yorkshire and the Humber Regional Customer First Celebration

Invitations will shortly be sent out to all those in Yorkshire and the Humber who are actively embracing Customer First.

The occasion in mid March, will be to celebrate the achievement of the Customer First Award by more than one hundred providers of business support and skills development. These organisations will also have an opportunity to share with others the benefits that they have secured by applying good practice described in the framework.

Further details will be confirmed via the Customer First UK website www.customerfirst.org once they have been finalised.

FINDING OUT MORE...

For more information about the Putting the Customer First Framework log on to: www.customerfirst.org

e-mail enquiries@customerfirst.org
tel 0845 2260719
fax 0845 2260718

BLU Business Support Workshops

Here are some of the forthcoming workshops that will be delivered by BLU.

Gross Value Added (GVA)

- Why demonstrating the impact of government spending is important
- How GVA helps us do this
- Using the measure and issues raised

Improving Business Competitiveness

- Anatomy of the business support sector
- Requirements and objectives of funding organisations
- Delivery methods, quality and performance controls

Effectively Managing Your Business Customer

- What our business customers want from our services
- 'What' and 'how' we deliver services to our customers
- Examples of good practice

How Do You Know You Are Making A Difference?'

- Are we making a difference?
- Different approaches to the question
- Sharing learning and good practice

For information on dates and venues, or if you would like BLU to tailor workshops as in-house events for your organisation or region, please call BLU Helpline on 0845 001 0030 or email BLU@sbs.gsi.gov.uk.