

Customer-Focused Government

What is Customer-Focused Government?

Customer-focused government should be seen as one aspect of a successful approach to government in response to rapidly growing public demands.

There is a perception that public services are not meeting public expectations of performance. The public is becoming more exacting in its demands and disillusioned when reality does not match them. It is clear that if government is going to provide first class public services it needs to redesign the system around the user.

The 'user as customer' theme is already familiar in government reforms. But in general the concept has been limited in scope and focused on front line service delivery, with little consideration of the role of policy making. That is unlikely to deliver the sustained improvements that the public demands.

To deliver lasting results, organisations need to embed customer focus throughout the system. Implementation must start by understanding the needs, expectations and behaviours of the public and then by adjusting every aspect of the organisation to align with customer values. This includes the entire delivery chain from policy through to front-line services – including strategy, performance measures, information systems and support processes.

For policy makers, customer-focused government does not automatically imply "the customer is always right". At the highest level, decisions will always be based on trade-offs in the allocation of risk and resource between competing interests. This suggests an approach that puts the focus on understanding and engaging customers.

Why consider adopting a new approach?

Customer-Focused Government:

- focuses on delivering results by ensuring a clarity of focus on the public as a customer from policy through to service delivery.
- is broad and integrated, recognising that a step change in performance requires many co-ordinated changes, beyond wider consultation and improved front line systems.
- is based on the fundamental values of government services by helping to strengthen its independence and the quality of its advice to Ministers.
- encourages tailored solutions, specific to each organisation's current practice, rather than standard recommendations.
- addresses implementation by focusing on what makes customer focus sustainable
- is cross-cutting by being independent of traditional silos of responsibility.

How is Customer-Focused Government achieved?

Through developing these four strengths:

- Understand the customer – clarity about who customers are, how they are defined, their interests, needs and behaviours and what government wants to do for/with them, for each major function within the organisation.
- Build operations around the customer - ensuring that the basic building blocks of the organisation – such as strategy, performance measures, systems, processes, structure and behaviours - support a focus on delivering desired customer objectives.
- Manage stakeholder relationships – making it important to manage relationships openly and communicate effectively, both with end customers and with other stakeholders such as industry groups and service partners.

- Use customer understanding to deliver target outcomes – exploiting the investment in the previous areas to improve performance against objectives and maximise efficiency.

What does Customer-Focused Government look like?

Overall:

- Clearer, outward focus and vision for government staff and their Ministers
- Deeper, shared understanding of main customers
- Information is organised by customer groups, across government where required
- Higher stakeholder satisfaction
- What is measured and rewarded is driven by what customers value
- Better alignment of resources to objectives
- Different staff motivation and improved morale

Policy:

- Proactive, outward driven policy processes with high stakeholder and public engagement
- Clear approach to defining the ‘public interest’ in terms of customer needs
- Ministers are involved in structured process of customer identification and management
- Ministers and officials at all levels seek to foster a team approach to understanding and meeting customer needs
- Staff have particular relationship management and/or customer representative roles
- Promotion is based on new values and skills
- Risk management focused on customer values and concerns
- Closely managed partnerships and exchanges with external organisations
- Policies that are more likely to be workable and achieve their objectives

Service Delivery:

- Services are designed and delivered around customer needs and interests
- Common definition and information about customer segments is shared across organisations from policy to delivery
- Effective channel strategy (management of different methods of communicating and transacting with customers, e.g. telephone, web, paper, face-to-face)
- Policy teams use abstracted operational data from delivery systems
- IT and e-government projects are embedded in wider transformational projects which address people, processes and performance management
- Large IT projects achieve measurable gains in effectiveness

Questions to initiate Customer-Focused Government

- Do you all agree who you mean by “stakeholders” and “customers”?
- Do you have a detailed set of key customer segments or groups which is used in practice?
- Do you set target outcomes or goals for each group or set of groups?
- Do you have a clear strategy for achieving these?
- Are your staff strongly motivated to achieve them?
- Do your values, objectives and performance measures reflect these goals?
- Do key stakeholder groups feel engaged in the process of achieving these goals?
- Do you measure stakeholder feedback, and act on it?
- Do you have the capacity – [skills, motivation, leadership, resources] – to achieve change?

Adapted from the UK Government paper “Customer-Focused Government – from policy to delivery” by the Public Services Productivity Panel 2001

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