

Proposals of the Galway County Jury

I. THE QUESTION OF CONNECTIVITY –

1. Any phone number, which enables the general public to contact a state agency, is a vital link in the relationship of people and government. What happens when any such number is called plays a vital part in the building up of public trust in government.
2. We are aware that the customer charters of some government agencies are committed to treating citizens in a manner corresponding to the standards specified in the Ombudsman's Office – i.e. properly, fairly, openly and impartially. [*Public Bodies and the Citizen - The Ombudsman's Guide to Standards of Best Practice for Public Servants.*] The Garda Charter, the Customer Department of Social Protection, County Galway Local Authorities Customer Service Action Plan, the National Healthcare Charter of the HSE use such terms as 'dignity,' 'respect,' 'courtesy' and 'clear communication.'
3. This proposal, however, deals with the moment after a citizen dials a public service number and before they succeed in speaking to a public servant. The significance of this moment, and of its effect on citizens if it goes wrong, is not appreciated by those who govern this country. The resulting frustration is doing real damage. It is undermining public confidence in government and public services and resulting in cynicism and disconnect among citizens.
4. In this context we note the value of doing business on line and we accept that giving citizens access to public services by means up to date broadband is best practice. However, to offer access solely by means up to date broadband is discrimination. Especially in rural areas, disadvantaged citizens are less likely to have access to broadband and this makes them even more disadvantaged, if they cannot access public services by phone.
5. The Galway County PeopleTalk Jury therefore makes the following proposal as a practical means of building trust in government. With respect to all public service phone numbers the following requirements should apply:
 - i. All calls, whether on mobile phone or land line, should be on a Freephone basis. This should be seen as integral to public service and the cost would be far less onerous to state agencies than the accumulated cost to individual citizens, especially those in need of public services and who can least afford to pay.
 - ii. If a call is not answered within 20 seconds, the following information should be available by way of recorded message:
 - b) How many are waiting ahead of the caller.
 - c) An estimate of how long the caller may have to wait for an answer.

- iii. This information should be repeated at a fifteen second interval.
- iv. Where the caller discontinues there should be an automatic record of who called and the call returned.
- v. Any public servant answering a public service number should give their first name and surname. To do otherwise should be regarded as unprofessional, particularly in a large organisation.
- vi. These numbers should be attended during normal business hours –
i.e. 9am-5.30pm, including lunch time and Friday afternoons.
- vii. For any public service number the following items of information should be publicly available
 - a. the number of calls made in any given period,
 - b. the number of calls answered and unanswered and
 - c. the average waiting period.

II. CITIZENS IN NEED – SHARING DATA BETWEEN AGENCIES.

- 6. When a citizen is in need of support from the state, there is a strong likelihood that they will need the services of more than one state agency. To obtain such support they are required to tell their story to a public servant whose task it is to determine whether or not they qualify for assistance.
- 7. Under current data protection arrangements this giving of details has to be repeated each time a citizen approaches a state agency to obtain support. While having to provide personal details to each state agency is necessary, repeating this process each time an application is made is distressing for those concerned and disquieting for public servants who are dealing with them as part of their work. *[In this regard we note the Report of the Exploratory Encounter Panel of 25 September, par 11.]* Having to tell their story of need repeatedly places a formidable and quite unnecessary barrier for citizens in need in seeking their rights.
- 8. The Public Service Reform Plan 2014-2016 refers to ‘a citizen authentication system’ which will ensure the protection of personal data which will give public bodies a ‘single customer view’ with access to relevant data, which will make easier for those applying for any kind of service from the state. The newly developed Public Services Card, with over 500,000 now issued, is being used by the Department of Social Protection and will be availed of by 125 public agencies, including all local authorities, the HSE and Údarás na Gaeltachta. The card will greatly facilitate people in making applications to public agencies, but there seems to be no clear time frame for the system to be fully in place throughout the public sector. In the meantime the problem outlined above will continue and the proposal which follows will be of relevance.
- 9. The Galway PeopleTalk Citizens’ Jury notes the right of every citizen, under the Data Protection Act, to receive a copy of any personal information held on electronic record in any organisation. Given this right, in law, the Jury makes the following proposal:
 - i. When a citizen makes an application to a state agency for help in a situation of need, the official who receives that application should inform them to the following effect:
You have right to a copy of the personal information, which you are about to provide, and if you apply to another agency for support a written copy of this information could be helpful.
 - ii. The citizen should be offered such a copy at the end of the interview.

III. CENTRALISATION WITH ACCESSIBILITY

10. The closing down of small – and largely unused – local offices of state agencies saves money in terms of rental or maintenance and heating of plant. It can make for more efficiencies in terms of access by officials to resources.
11. Reduction of cost, and more effective access of agency employees to agency resources are both easily measured from within the organisation. They leave out of account a third factor, namely, the accessibility of the agency to the citizens it is meant to serve.
12. The following government agencies are engaged in a process of centralisation in Galway County:
 - The Department of Social Protection has replaced the Community Welfare Officer by a more centralised and less locally available structure
 - The HSE is centralising District Nurses,
 - The Post Office is closing down local branches.
 - The Garda Síochána is closing local Garda Stations.
 - The Department of Education is closing small National Schools.
 - The Department of Agriculture is closing down Teagasc Offices
13. We realise that part of the rationale for these changes is act as a disincentive to some who are too inclined to be looking for assistance to which they have no right, but this fails to take into account the accumulative and disproportionate impact of these policies on those who are most in need.
14. This is particularly unfair to those citizens are required to go to towns which are supposedly local but with which there is no public transport connection. [Where such a connection exists it is quite often sporadic and, for people of limited means, costly.]
15. Most people associate with their local village or town as envisaged in the seventeen Local Area Plans adopted by Galway County Council. Many, though not all, of these local centres are served by well-resourced community facilities. The County Council has a leadership role to play in providing these facilities.
16. This Jury, therefore, makes the following proposals:
 - i. State agencies should rent publicly accessible space for a few hours a week in outlying local centres to make their services accessible.
 - ii. Community Centres, GAA Centres, Libraries, Resource Centres, unused and underused courthouses etc. are well placed to provide such space especially during working hours. This could be done with minimal expense, compared with keeping an agency office continually available. It would impede, to some degree, immediate access of employees to agency resources, but it would greatly improve the accessibility of public services in rural areas.
 - iii. Where it is not feasible to rent space in a local community, an agency should ensure that adequate public transport is available, especially through the Rural Transport Scheme.

IV. PUBLIC BODIES AND THE CITIZEN.

17. County Galway Local Authorities Customer Service Action Plan, The National HealthCare Charter, The Department of Social Protection Customer Charter and Action Plan, the Garda Charter and the Údarás na Gaeltachta Client Charter all speak about 'respect' or 'courtesy' in dealing with members of the general public. Various other standards are set in relation to 'quality service,' 'equality/diversity,' 'information,' 'physical access,' 'complaints' etc.

i. The Ombudsman's Guide to Best Practise.

18. These charters all say more or less the same thing in different ways and it is hard to see why there can't one text to which all agencies can adhere - and with which all citizens can be familiar. Such a text already exists. Issued in 2003, 'Public Bodies and the Citizen, The Ombudsman's Guide to Standards of Best Practice for Public Servants' calls on public servants to ensure that people are dealt with 'properly, fairly, openly and impartially.' It then spells out in clear language, and in less than two pages, what these words mean in practise.

19. The only significant shortcoming of the Ombudsman's Guide to Best Practise is that it is not widely known. In Canada, Australia and New Zealand a comparable document has been delivered to every home; the same should happen here. It should also be on display in every public office of every public agency and accessible on every public service website.

ii. An untapped resource: people at ground level.

20. Even if standards were clear, people would continue to think politics and public administration too complex. No charter on its own will resolve this problem and the resulting disconnect. One practical result of this is when citizens are treated in an unsatisfactory way they often feel completely helpless; they don't believe that anything can be done. Few will have the energy to make a formal complaint to the Ombudsman especially if, as is often the case, they are in a stressful situation.

21. The relationship between the citizen and public services needs to be rethought in a way which draws from the experience and insight of those who have most experience of this interaction – citizens on the ground and those at the first level of management in the public service.

22. Part of the helplessness of citizens, when they have to deal with bad manners and poor service in dealing with a state agency, is that they have no way of seeing beyond this experience to its underlying cause. All they can tell for sure is that they have been badly treated.

23. Bad manners is often a result of demotivation, arising from under-staffing and inadequate resources. Matters are not helped by the fact that the tensions under which public servants work at ground level are seldom acknowledged. These tensions are well described in the opening part of the Exploratory Encounter Panel Statement [par. 1 to 5]. They include:

- a. ensuring that entitlements are not abused,
- b. when turning down an application, dealing with dashed hopes and the natural human reaction of deprivation and protest,
- c. communicating, in a respectful way, the limited scope of the official's decision-making power.

24. In commercial situations the final decision is made by the customer or client but, in dealings between citizen and state, the public servant is the one who makes the final decision. This explains why, as the Panel Statement points out, public servants will always be to some degree 'guarded in their attitude.' They are, after all, officials of the state and not sales representatives.
25. If we are to have the best possible service from state agencies we need to draw on the experience of public servants who work directly with citizens, as happened with this Jury and the Exploratory Encounter Panel. The perspective of public servants at the lower levels of management is an untapped resource.
26. At the same time, a Jury made up of willing citizens randomly selected ensures that the ultimate concern is not with the agencies themselves, and their own dealings with each other, but with the service of the people of this country.

iii. Communicating with Citizens

27. Finally, public agencies need to rethink their way of communicating with the public they serve. At present the state only communicates directly to collect money; no other information is communicated in a direct manner. For instance, very few people are aware of the current proposal to unite Galway City and County Councils. The sad reality probably is that most people don't care much about the matter, but a government which is trying to encourage responsible citizenship should be taking the trouble to ensure that as many as possible are informed as effectively as possible. While mail shots are expensive, a high proportion of the population is accessible by email and this method is cost free and a lot more effective than putting a notice in an obscure page of a newspaper. An email would not inform everyone, but it would spread the news far more effectively.

The items which follow do not contain any specific proposals but the Jury feels compelled to raise them as matters of concern.

V. CENTRALISATION AND DRIVERS LICENCES.

28. The Jury questioned the centralisation of Driver Licence Applications when it is possible to obtain a passport by post, when it is possible to obtain a passport by post and to have to turn up in person to be photographed for a driver's licence?

VI. FULLY UP TO DATE BROADBAND.

29. This is an essential service in the twenty first century. Without it...

- i. Professionals cannot work in a professional manner.
- ii. Business cannot work in a business-like manner.
- iii. Citizens are denied equal access to public services.
- iv. The education of children is seriously impaired.

In today's world to be deprived of up to date broadband is like being deprived of electricity, running water or television.

VII. FRAUDULENT BEHAVIOUR.

30. Concern was expressed in the Exploratory Encounter Panel Report about situations where officials come across evidence that individuals are defrauding other state agencies of much needed public resources. After a conversation with Noel Tallon of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform the Jury believes that the following principles need to be made more explicit:

- i. The public servant does not work in isolation but in the public service of the state.
- ii. The primary duty of every public servant is to serve the common good.
- iii. The common good requires that resources of state are to be cared for in the interests of citizens.
- iv. If a public servant has reason to suspect that those resources are being abused, in any way, it is their duty to act on that suspicion.
- v. At the very least they are required to report it to their immediate superior; they might also share the information acquired with other agencies or with the Gardaí.

VIII. A&E AND ALCOHOL ABUSE:

31. The behaviour of people coming in drunk to A&E is a major public order issue and poses a serious difficulty in the health service. We don't have a specific proposal to offer on this matter, but we do feel obliged to register public concern on this matter.

June, 2015.