

Improved service

The writing of the Buffalo City Service Charter was an iterative process that involved a cross-section of officials in the municipality. During the sessions, the measurability of the promises and pledges on quality was hotly debated. Officials agreed that in the case of some services, like water and sanitation, there are national standards with which they have to comply. However, there were disagreements in other areas, such as social services, where there are no national standards and where some claimed that no pledges or quality promises could be made due to a lack of resources.

“In social services,” said one frustrated official, “we are operating beyond breaking point. We are at a point where we are under threat of disintegrating...There are huge expectations. But there is also a huge ignorance of our capacity and of the financial implications of the expectations. We have to please our politicians. The politicians have to deal with the expectations of their community. And so all of us end up disappointing each other. The standards we can undertake to provide are not politically acceptable.”

This comment evoked new questions: Could you commit to continuous improvement? Could you offer a remedy to people if they are not treated courteously? Could you allow a complaint medium where people get a response and an apology and explanation?

While not legally binding, a customer service charter places a moral obligation on the municipality to render the services it claims to do. The charter effectively outlines a social contract between the municipality and the community it serves. The charter is written as a series of promises or pledges on quality, related to services rendered by the institution. Promises on quality must be in agreement with the needs and expectations of the customer, but must also stand in a realistic relationship to the resources of the municipality where there are many competing demands and limited funds. A prerequisite is that they be *realistic*,

“What do we mean when we say ‘people first’?”

“If charters, declarations and value statements do not have the power to kick you in the shin they are generally not worth the paper they are written on!”

achievable and measurable. Promises on quality must be expressed with sufficient clarity that the customer can decide whether or not they have been kept.

What follows is an abridged version of the Buffalo City Customer Service Charter and aims to illustrate the style in which a charter can be written.

Buffalo City Municipality Customer Care Service Charter

On the basis of this Service Charter, the customer/citizen has the right to expect, and if necessary, to demand, that the services meet the standard set in the Charter and the quality requirements imposed. The Service Charter is a commitment that is ethically and morally binding on the municipality.

The staff of the Buffalo City Municipality were key to drawing up a customer service charter that clearly sets out the standards of service that they will provide. The premise

of the Buffalo City Customer Care Service Charter finds its roots in the national Batho Pele approach.

Our general pledge

- Buffalo City Municipality commits itself to set clear standards of service that users can expect, to monitor and review performance, to publish the results and to receive independent validation wherever possible.
- The municipality pledges to communicate with the community in a truthful, open and transparent manner.
- The IDP process will be used as the main consultation mechanism with communities.
- The municipality will monitor quality and gather feedback from our customers through the annual Buffalo City Customer Satisfaction survey.
- The findings of the Customer Satisfaction survey will be published and publicised annually.
- The municipality will strive to ensure that its management systems are sufficiently well-structured to deal with customer complaints and queries.
- The procedure for clients to make complaints and the standards they can expect of the complaints handling process are set out below. We guarantee to respond in acknowledgement of all complaints within 14 days. We guarantee that answers, results or a progress report will be provided within 60 working days from the date of receipt of the complaint.

The next section of the charter is devoted to each service cluster, making specific pledges relevant to its functions. For example, in relation to trading services which include water, sanitation and electricity, it is pledged that:

- Trading services will be provided at the most affordable rate to communities and stakeholders and will be reviewed annually to ensure that service levels are kept affordable.

The previous article in this series (see *LG Bulletin 8(2)*, p.7) emphasised the importance of having an internal customer focus in order to improve external service delivery. In this spirit, the Charter includes specific pledges related to how services **between** departments will be rendered. For example, a pledge in the internal charter related to IT may be the following:

- We will maintain a two working day turnaround time to resolve all IT-related queries.

The last section deals with citizen/customer responsibilities. While service charters reflect the promises on quality made by the municipality, they also highlight the responsibility of the customer/citizen. This is particularly important for a municipality that needs to maintain service levels as well as payment levels from its customers.

Customer/citizen responsibilities

Customers/citizens are expected to:

- Treat officials with courtesy.
- Abide by any legal requirements and other obligations that they must meet in order to be eligible for services sought.

Various municipal contact details are provided at the end of the charter for citizens to use for queries or complaints.

Comment

The Service Charter in Buffalo City is now being test driven. Its effectiveness will be probed regularly in an annual customer satisfaction survey. It is work in progress. However, one lesson is already clear for politicians who make promises: a charter cannot be imposed from the outside. It has to be developed from the inside, by the people who will make it work.

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The next, and last, article in this series will reflect on a model for customer care in local government.

