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THE CITIZEN'S CHARTER

RAISING THE STANDARD



PRESENTED TO PARLIAMENT BY
THE PRIME MINISTER
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FOREWORD

I take great pleasure in the first set of initiatives under the Citizen's Charter. To make public services answer better to the wishes of their users, and to raise their quality overall, have been ambitions of mine ever since I was a local councillor in Lambeth over 20 years ago.

In the 1980s, reforms in schools, housing and hospitals gave people more say in how their services are run. Privatisation and contracting-out have transformed performance. The programme we are publishing today carries these reforms further - and into new territory. I want the Citizen's Charter to be one of the central themes of public life in the 1990s.

For this White Paper is only a beginning. Over the coming months, Ministers will be bringing forward more detailed plans for each service. But today we provide some early examples of how the principles of the Charter will be applied. How we will, for example, be introducing guaranteed maximum waiting times for hospital operations. How we will require all schools to provide parents with reports. How British Rail will be introducing new compensation schemes for poor service. How those who regulate electricity, water, gas and telecommunications will be given the same strong powers to insist on good service standards for the customer. How we will toughen up inspection and audit, relate pay more closely to performance, and provide the citizen with more and better information.

The Citizen's Charter is about giving more power to the citizen. But citizenship is about our responsibilities - as parents, for example, or as neighbours - as well as our entitlements. The Citizen's Charter is not a recipe for more state action; it is a testament of our belief in people's right to be informed and choose for themselves.

The White Paper sets out the mechanics for improving choice, quality, value and accountability. Not all apply to every service. But all have a common objective: to raise the standard of public services, up to and beyond the best at present available.

There is a well-spring of talent, energy, care and commitment in our public services. The aim of the Citizen's Charter is to release these qualities. Then we will have services in which the citizen can have confidence, and all public servants can have pride.



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INTRODUCTION

All public services are paid for by individual citizens, either directly or through their taxes. They are entitled to expect high-quality services, responsive to their needs, provided efficiently at a reasonable cost. Where the state is engaged in regulating, taxing or administering justice, these functions too must be carried out fairly, effectively and courteously.

This Government continues to uphold the central principle that essential services – such as education and health – must be available to all, irrespective of means. And its consistent aim has been to increase choice, extend competition and thereby improve quality in all services.

In a free market, competing firms must strive to satisfy their customers, or they will not prosper. Where choice and competition are limited, consumers cannot as easily or effectively make their views count. In many public services, therefore, we need to increase both choice and competition where we can; but we also need to develop other ways of ensuring good standards of service.

Many of Britain's key industries and public services have been privatised in the last decade. This has been done in a way which promotes direct competition between providers as far as possible. Where elements of monopoly remain, regulation protects the consumer.

Choice can also be extended within the public sector. When the public sector remains responsible for a function it can introduce competition and pressure for efficiency by contracting with the private sector for its provision.

Finally, choice can be restored by introducing alternative forms of provision, and creating a wider range of options wherever that is cost-effective. This has been a key objective, for example, of reforms in housing and education.

Through the Citizen's Charter the Government is now determined to drive reforms further into the core of the public services, extending the benefits of choice, competition, and commitment to service more widely.

The Citizen's Charter is the most comprehensive programme ever to raise quality, increase choice, secure better value, and extend accountability. We believe that it will set a pattern, not only for Britain, but for other countries of the world.

The Charter programme will be pursued in a number of ways. The approach will vary from service to service in different parts of the United Kingdom. The Citizen's Charter is not a blueprint which imposes a drab and uniform pattern on every service. It is a toolkit of initiatives and ideas to raise standards in the way most appropriate to each service.

The Charter programme will be at the heart of government policy in the 1990s. Quality of service to the public, and the new pride that it will give to the public servants who provide it, will be a central theme.

There are four main themes in the White Paper:

QUALITY – A sustained new programme for improving the quality of public services.

CHOICE – Choice, wherever possible between competing providers, is the best spur to quality improvement.

STANDARDS – The citizen must be told what service standards are and be able to act where service is unacceptable.

VALUE – The citizen is also a taxpayer; public services must give value for money within a tax bill the nation can afford.

The range of mechanisms in the Charter covers:

- more privatisation;
- wider competition;
- further contracting-out;
- more performance-related pay;
- published performance targets – local and national;
- comprehensive publication of information on standards achieved;
- more effective complaints procedures;
- tougher and more independent inspectorates;
- better redress for the citizen when services go badly wrong.

THE PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC SERVICE

Every citizen is entitled to expect:

• **Standards**

Explicit standards, published and prominently displayed at the point of delivery. These standards should invariably include courtesy and helpfulness from staff, accuracy in accordance with statutory entitlements, and a commitment to prompt action, which might be expressed in terms of a target response or waiting time. If targets are to be stretched, it may not be possible to guarantee them in every case; minimum, as well as average, standards may be necessary. There should be a clear presumption that standards will be progressively improved as services become more efficient.

• **Openness**

There should be no secrecy about how public services are run, how much they cost, who is in charge, and whether or not they are meeting their standards. Public servants should not be anonymous. Save only where there is a real threat to their safety, all those who deal directly with the public should wear name badges and give their name on the telephone and in letters.

• **Information**

Full, accurate information should be readily available, in plain language, about what services are being provided. Targets should be published, together with full and audited information about the results achieved. Wherever possible, information should be in comparable form, so that there is a pressure to emulate the best.

• **Choice**

The public sector should provide choice wherever practicable. The people affected by services should be consulted. Their views about the services they use should be sought regularly and systematically to inform decisions about what services should be provided.

• **Non-discrimination**

Services should be available regardless of race or sex. Leaflets are being printed in minority languages where there is a need. In Wales public bodies are aware of the needs of Welsh speakers.

• **Accessibility**

Services should be run to suit the convenience of customers, not staff. This means flexible opening hours, and telephone inquiry points that direct callers quickly to someone who can help them.

• **And if things go wrong?**

At the very least, the citizen is entitled to a good explanation, or an apology. He or she should be told **why** the train is late, or **why** the doctor could not keep the appointment. There should be a well-publicised and readily available complaints procedure. If there is a serious problem, it should be put right. And lessons must be learnt so that mistakes are not repeated. Nobody wants to see money diverted from service improvement into large-scale compensation for indifferent services. But the Government intends to introduce new forms of redress where these can be made to stimulate rather than distract from efficiency.

Scope

The Citizen's Charter applies to all public services. These include government departments and agencies, nationalised industries, local authorities, the NHS, the courts, police and emergency services. In the private sector, it covers the key utilities; it does not encompass wider consumer protection law.

Cost

The Government remains committed to a sound public expenditure and tax policy. Total public spending has fallen as a share of national income. Within this framework extra taxpayers' money has been put into key services. For example, in the past ten years the level of spending on education has increased by nearly 13 per cent in real terms and that on health and personal social services by 27 per cent. The cost of these services for each adult member of the population is now around £620 a year for education and £740 for health and personal social services. In all, public spending amounts to some £5,000 per adult each year. We shall continue to put more resources into priority public services whenever extra money can be afforded. The Charter programme is about finding better ways of converting the money that can be afforded into even better services.

Charter Standard and Chartermark

We will publish a new standard for the delivery of quality in public services – the Charter Standard. The key principles will be:

- Publication of the standards of service that the customer can reasonably expect, and of performance against those standards.
- Evidence that the views of those who use the service have been taken into account in setting standards.
- Clear information about the range of services provided, in plain language.
- Courteous and efficient customer service, from staff who are normally prepared to identify themselves by name.
- Well-signposted avenues for complaint if the customer is not satisfied, with some means of independent review wherever possible.
- Independent validation of performance against standards and a clear commitment to improving value for money.

Only those who meet the Charter Standard will be entitled to use the Chartermark.

Implementation

The task is an ambitious one. We are determined to make it happen as quickly as possible. Implementation must be local and specific. It is in the hospital, the school, the police station, and the tax office that the citizen will expect the commitment to raising standards to become a reality.

Services work best where those responsible for providing them can respond directly to the needs of their clients. This White Paper sets the framework and gives some examples of what the new policy will mean in some key areas. It will be followed up by a programme of action across all public services and by detailed charters for patients, parents, passengers, taxpayers, and other groups.

We are determined to ensure that the goals set out in the White Paper are achieved. In some areas reforms are already in place which will form the springboard for implementing the Charter proposals. In other parts of the public sector, employees are dedicated and eager to provide a good service, but are held back by the systems in which they work.

The Government will act swiftly, and will bring forward legislation to remove obstacles, open the way for improvements and strengthen the powers of auditors and regulators. A summary of the proposals in the White Paper is set out after this introduction.

Citizen's Charter Unit and the Prime Minister's panel of advisers

The Prime Minister will appoint a panel of advisers on the Citizen's Charter initiative. A unit will be set up in the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate the programme of action arising from the White Paper.

One of the first tasks will be to convert the Charter principles into generally applicable guidance on the way in which standards should be specified in the public services, taking account of progress already made in the development of codes and practices for quality performance in the field of services.

We will be taking immediate steps to encourage all public services to adopt Charter principles and to apply them to their own operations. Those organisations which feel they have achieved excellence in pursuit of the Citizen's Charter objectives will be able to apply for the Charter Standard and the right to use the Chartermark.