PUTTING QUALITY ON THE MAP:
MEASURING AND APPRAISING QUALITY
IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

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SUMMARY

The 1990s have seen a resurgence of interest in quality. Industry and commerce have realised that quality is a vital component in their products. Much of the advantage that the Japanese have gained in world trade is judged to come from their attention to the quality of their products. The Department of Trade and Industry now supports the improvement of quality in British industry by promoting quality assurance programmes, and by giving grants to some companies to help implement formal quality assurance systems.

In the public sector as well, there is increasing interest in quality. The principles of making public services answer better to the wishes of their users, and raising their quality overall are the foundations of the Citizen's Charter. Many local authorities across the whole political spectrum have set up quality programmes, often allocating them substantial sums of money. In the health service, quality initiatives in areas such as nursing care and medical audit are relatively long-standing, and the introduction of the purchaser-provider divide since 1991 has given rise to further effort to define quality in contracting processes.

But quality, and quality in the public sector particularly, has many interpretations, as is clearly shown by the wide variety of initiatives that are regularly reported in the local government and health services press.

So the question 'what constitutes a quality service?' is often unanswered, or only partly answered. As a result, authorities may be investing in quality programmes that only address one facet of quality, and ignore other vital dimensions, where investment might yield a greater return in terms of improved quality of service.

The Audit Commission supports the improvement in the quality of public services. The thrust of the Commission's work over the past decade has been to identify services that combine efficiency with effectiveness and quality. This has been supported by the VFM work of auditors and by the provision of information on comparative performance through the statistical Profiles for local government and health services, and more recently through the Quality Exchange initiative.

This paper uses the approach adopted in developing the Quality Exchange questionnaires in order to identify quality issues applicable to any service, and develops check-lists that
managers can use to assess their own situation.

The Commission has identified four key areas of quality that will together contribute to a Quality Service.

- **Quality of Communication**: does the council communicate with, listen to and understand users?
- **Quality of Specification**: is this understanding converted into clear standards for service delivery?
- **Quality of Delivery**: are the standards actually delivered, and is remedial action taken when failure occurs?
- **Quality of People and Systems**: are staff motivated, trained, well managed and supported by good management processes and systems?

A quality service will also have a foundation of adequate resources, used effectively and without waste to deliver the services.

A regular appraisal of services against these criteria, leading to actions to improve services, will contribute to the continuing improvement in quality that should be the aim of all authorities.

The purpose of this paper is to help authorities initiating quality programmes to consider all these issues. Managers may find it a useful aid to think through their overall strategy for quality, and identify areas that need to be strengthened in order to deliver a quality service.

**INRODUCTION**

1 Quality has become a key issue for organisations in both the public and the private sector of the economy. Quality initiatives, quality programmes and quality assurance schemes are increasingly being introduced, in response to pressures from many sides.

2 In the private sector, quality initiatives and quality programmes stem from both the need to increase market share by meeting customers needs, and from the desire to reduce the often substantial cost of correcting failures to deliver the right quality. Satisfying customers is becoming a more explicit and higher priority goal for many companies with the presumption that increased sales and profits will follow. The DTI Enterprise Initiative is offering financial assistance for small or medium sized firms to develop quality processes.

3 In the public sector, there is wide political support for an improvement in quality. At the national level, the Government launched the Citizen’s Charter in 1991, and the Audit Commission has published the first list of national performance indicators. These will enable authorities to demonstrate both the efficiency and quality of their services. The NHS management executive has set out the areas of service where standards must be set and published.

4 At the local level, councils and health authorities are producing their own initiatives such as:-

- Local citizen's charters;
- Customer contracts;
- Customer care programmes;
- Consumer surveys;
- Complaints and redress processes;
- Quality assurance (e.g. BS 5750); and,
- Total Quality Management programmes.

5 Compulsory Competitive Tendering and the purchaser - provider divide have highlighted the need to make the quality dimension more explicit in specifications, while the proposal to extend compulsory tendering to professional services in local government highlights the need to establish ways of assessing and delivering quality in these services.

6 The current process of reviewing the structure of local government has indirectly put pressure on authorities to improve quality. An authority that provides poor quality services is unlikely to attract support from its citizens when its future is under discussion. Similarly, hospitals seeking trust status also have to demonstrate that they have community support.

**WHAT IS QUALITY?**

7 Many people have sought to define quality. The British Standard 4778: 1987 defines quality as:

   ... *The totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs...*

8 The American quality expert, Dr Joseph Juran, describes quality as 'fitness for purpose', while phrases such as 'satisfying and exceeding customer needs', or 'delighting the customer' have been used by other writers. Processes for assessing quality, such as the Baldrige award scheme in the USA, have also been developed.
9 But applying definitions and processes used in the private sector to the public sector can be dangerous. In the private sector, 'satisfying stated or implied needs' will lead to increased sales and profits. This is not necessarily true in the public sector. Increased quality leading to increased demand can lead to increased expenditure, against limited budgets. This problem does not invalidate the need to consider users' needs in service delivery; rather it emphasises the importance of informing users about what can be done, understanding users' expectations and incorporating this understanding into policies and targets.

10 While definitions of quality are helpful, they do not answer the manager's question 'what do I need to do to improve the quality of my service?'

11 So whatever definition or concept of quality is used, the vital point is how it is put into practice. The Audit Commission has been looking at the many ideas about quality being developed by practitioners and researchers, as well as developing practical ways of measuring and assessing service quality through the Quality Exchange initiative, and through its programme of national and local studies. The different ideas and approaches can be linked together, to form an overall 'Quality Map', which can form a basis to evaluate quality initiatives, to identify weaknesses, and to determine the actions needed to improve the quality of a service.

I. THE QUALITY MAP

12 The Commission sees that developing a quality programme involves paying attention to four key areas of quality:

- **Quality of Communication:** a quality service will provide effective communication with the user, and reflect an understanding of the user's needs and wants - and will try to reconcile them.

- **Quality of Specification:** a quality service will be based on standards and defined priorities that are made clear to the staff providing the service, and to the public.

- **Quality of Delivery:** a quality service will monitor the delivery and take action when standards are not met.

- **Quality of People and Systems:** a quality service will be delivered by suitably trained and motivated people, supported by good management systems.

13 And the foundation of a quality service will be the economic and efficient use of resources. These can include money, staff, buildings or plant.

14 These key elements together form the 'Quality Map' (Exhibit 1).

15 Authorities can assess where they are at present by plotting where their initiatives are located on the map, and prioritise the next steps to be taken. These steps need to focus on factors that can be controlled, or perhaps influenced, by the authority. But in order to use the map effectively, there must be a clear understanding of each area, and of the issues that it raises. This paper looks first at the principles governing the relationship between a service provider and a service user. These principles are then extended to the more complex relationships in service delivery, such as purchaser-provider or client-contractor linkages.

Exhibit 1

THE QUALITY MAP

The map is made up of four key elements of quality: communication, specification, delivery and people & systems.
2. **QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION**

16 A service, as opposed to a product, has some vital characteristics that need to be considered. These are:-
   - A service usually involves both the customer and the supplier in its delivery: a teacher cannot teach without a student, a nurse cannot care without patients.
   - A service is nearly always produced as it is delivered. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make quality control checks before delivering the service.
   - Public service providers are often monopolies, and the scope for 'shopping around' is often limited.

17 If the service is to be effective and provide users with what they need or want, and at the same time meet the political or financial priorities of the provider as well as any statutory obligations there has to be a 'Quality of Communication' between the user and provider. For the provider this will entail informing users, listening to them and understanding their needs and wants.

18 A first task, therefore, is to define the users.

**DEFINING THE USER**

19 A commercial transaction typically involves a supplier and a customer who also pays for the goods or services. Public services are more complicated. The service the user receives is usually subsidised by the tax-payers. And there are other stakeholders who might be involved; for example:
   - the indirect recipient of the service (e.g. the family of the direct recipient);
   - the wider community; and,
   - local industry (in the case of training).

20 This list can be expanded in many cases, and not all the users will have similar objectives. In the case of planning development control, the developer may have different objectives to the people living near the site, and the local community may have a further set of objectives. The potential conflicts between the priorities of the different users or stakeholders need to be recognised.

21 The need to satisfy this range of potential users can explain why defining quality in the public service can be so complex. Authorities frequently have to strike a balance between satisfying the individual user and meeting the priorities of the wider community.
QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION - A CHECK LIST

Customers and User

Have you determined who are your customers'?
If there are multiple customers, have priorities been established?

Are there clear standards for responding to telephoning and other enquiries?

Informing and Communication

Do you inform people about service standards?
entitlement to service?
policies and priorities?
access to services?

Have you asked users about:
standards
satisfaction
Problems?

Do you give appointments?
(where appropriate)

Are your offices and buildings welcoming, clearly signposted,
and are staff knowledgeable

Listening and Understanding

Do you analyse complaints?

Have you used the knowledge and experience of members or front-line staff to assess satisfaction?

COMMUNICATING WITH THE USER

22 But whoever the user is, a strategy for communication needs to be established. Authorities have addressed this issue in a number of ways. The 'Citizen's Charters' produced by a number of authorities seek to inform the public about their goals and targets, while 'customer contracts' explain in more detail the standards to be expected of particular services. Hospitals provide pamphlets describing treatments. Newsletters, newspapers and annual reports all focus on the issue of communication, as do user groups and community councils.

23 Communication with citizens can take place in other less obvious ways. It can involve ensuring that the public are aware of services and can find their way to them easily. Listings in the phone book and clear direction signs around the civic buildings or hospital are all forms of communication. And these listings and descriptions should be in easily understood terms. Not all citizens will realise that a 'Civic Amenity Site' is a rubbish tip.

24 But communication must be a continuing dialogue. This means listening as well as informing. A number of authorities carry out customer surveys or market research either on a 'one off' or on a regular basis to see how their services are perceived, and how they can be improved.

25 Consultation processes, customer panels, open days and exhibitions are all ways in which users can make their views known. The opinions of front-line staff who have regular contact with the public, and of members, can also contribute quite cheaply to understanding needs, as can the careful consideration of complaints. User views and needs can also be assessed through in-depth research projects. Norfolk Social Services for example carried out research into its old people's homes by getting volunteers to 'live' in the homes for a period of time, and to report on their findings.

26 Finally, for some services people can make their views apparent by the use made of facilities. A swimming pool, or leisure centre that fails to provide the required quality will see its attendances drop.

3. QUALITY OF SPECIFICATION

27 An understanding of needs, whether of the individual user or of the general public, is of little use unless it influences the policy process, and is developed into a clear description of the service: the 'Quality of Specification'. Since needs, priorities and policies can change, this specification will need to be reviewed regularly and developed to ensure that it continues to reflect what users want from their services.

28 Whilst authorities are becoming increasingly familiar with specifying services in contracts as CCT extends, a similar process can be applied to all services. In this context, the 'specification' of a quality service can be very wide-ranging, and might cover:

- defining corporate and service policies;
- defining objectives, intentions and priorities;
- standards to be achieved, and speed of response;
accessibility and availability;
QUALITY OF
SPECIFICATION-
A CHECK-LIST

Are there clear standards for:
service volume?
method or style of service delivery?
service output?
expected outcomes of service?
response times?
accessibility?
staff expertise?
staff courtesy?

Are these standards communicated to staff?

Are staff and section responsibilities defined?

Are there internal SLAs or business plans with clear standards?

- resource input - cash or equipment;
- environment of service delivery;
- staffing and qualifications;
- staff courtesy;
- methods to be used; and,
- expected outcome.

29 Whilst some of these aspects might be familiar from existing customer contracts or contract specifications, others are less commonly found. But the qualifications of staff, for example, could become part of the definition of the quality thresholds for tendering a legal or accountancy service.

30 For some services the method of delivery might be essential and included in the specification, but a balance must be struck between ensuring that the desired results are achieved and being too prescriptive, which could stifle innovation.

31 The specification should be understood by staff as well as the public. One way of achieving this is to involve staff, particularly those in contact with users, in setting the specification. Such a process can increase the understanding and ownership of both the standards and the culture the authority is promoting. Authorities might produce a business or service plan, or a service level agreement (SLA) or procedure manual to inform staff. These should include definitions of responsibilities and performance targets, as well as defining the way in which performance will be assessed.
32 Documentation alone is usually inadequate as a means of explaining standards. Training seminars and workshops might be used to inform staff. Most importantly, some elements of the specification can best be communicated through example. Senior managers should demonstrate their commitment to the specification through their personal attitude, behaviour and performance.

4. **QUALITY OF DELIVERY**

33 A clear set of standards for services founded on policies, that reflects an understanding of both individual needs and community needs, is of no use unless it is actually delivered.

34 A quality service will include means of checking whether the service specified is taking place, and a continuing programme of action to reduce and eliminate failures in delivery.

35 Internal controls, such as supervision systems and management by walking about, all provide an opportunity for managers to check that services are being delivered to specification. Where CCT and other contracts are concerned, many authorities have set up formal inspection processes to ensure compliance with specification.

36 One of the most effective checks on the delivery of specified standards is to use the skills of the staff delivering the service. Many quality initiatives emphasise the point that quality is everyone's responsibility. And a performance review system will help ensure that standards are being achieved.

37 A further source of information on delivery is the consumer. Complaints of failure or shortfall can be used to check whether specifications have been delivered. Some services can most effectively be checked by the consumer: refuse collection has a quality control officer in every householder. But complaints need to be encouraged if they are to be used as a quality control. They must be easy to make, using reply paid cards or telephone lines that are available outside, as well as during, office hours.
**QUALITY OF DELIVERY - A CHECKLIST**

| Do you use every possible source of information - consumers, members, staff? | Do you respond - and how quickly? |
| Do you monitor: | Do you analyse the cause? |
| whether service is to specification? | Are they monitored and reported? |
| the level and results of inspections? | Do you learn from other organisations? |
| whether supervision is taking place? | Do you use the information to review services and prevent future occurrence of problems? |
| **Complaints** | |
| Is there a clear and simple process? |

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38 But determining the quality of a service through complaints needs to be done with care. A high level of complaints does not necessarily imply user dissatisfaction, particularly when the efforts of the local authority to put things right are visible.

39 The Commission’s Quality Exchange survey of refuse collection, street lighting, and street cleansing demonstrates this point. Refuse collection and street lighting generate relatively high volumes of complaints (Exhibit 2). These are services where putting the problem right is visible. The bin is emptied the next day: the street light is fixed. And these services regularly score highly in public opinion.

40 But with street cleansing the response to complaints is less apparent. Even if work is done in response to complaints, littering is likely to occur again, and it is not surprising that public satisfaction is relatively low.

41 The identification of service failures and putting them right are only first steps in the quality process. Managers need to look beyond the immediate task of ‘fixing’ the problem. They need to discover the cause of the problem, and prevent future occurrence. This might involve training staff or changing processes for delivering the service. And as well as learning from our own mistakes, it is possible to learn from the mistakes of others. These problems are often publicised in the professional or national press, and through the reports of the Ombudsman. Managing a quality service depends on asking ‘could such a problem happen here’? If the answer is unclear, or ‘yes’, then action should be planned and implemented.

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**Exhibit 2**

**CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND COMPLAINT LEVELS**

A high volume of complaints does not imply dissatisfaction

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5. QUALITY OF PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

42 People and management systems are the vital components that bind together the delivery of quality services.
QUALITY OF PEOPLE
43 Services depend on people for delivery. The way that they are led, and their behaviour and skills are vital in achieving the required result. The Commission, in its paper People Management: Human Resources in Tomorrow’s Public Services, has emphasised this point.

‘... Good people are essential for any organisation, particularly in service businesses where they account for a large element of cost, are a major part of the service, and have a decisive influence on the way the organisation is perceived by its customers...’

44 Having good quality people requires clear plans and policies for people management, and means reviewing strategies for:
- recruitment;
- motivation;
- internal communication;
- training;
- pay and non-pay benefits;
- equal opportunities;
- health and safety;
- industrial relations; and,
- organisational development.

QUALITY OF PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS - A CHECK LIST

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do managers provide leadership in the drive for quality?</td>
<td>Are turnover and sickness monitored?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there an up-to-date personnel strategy covering:-</td>
<td>Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appropriate selection methods?</td>
<td>Are there processes for regular review of policies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff training and qualification?</td>
<td>Are there clear management procedures?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structure and responsibility?</td>
<td>Are they up to date?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff development and motivation?</td>
<td>Is their relevance reviewed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equal opportunities?</td>
<td>Is there timely and accurate management information?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health, safety and welfare?</td>
<td>Is there a performance review system?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45 Some authorities may consider they are already setting high standards of people management in all these areas; others may wish to review their arrangements for particular areas or more generally.

46 The main benefits from reviewing personnel policies and investing in people will be:
- **better managers** able to deploy, develop and motivate their workforces;
- **better employees** who will see that the authority recognises their individual and collective abilities;
- **better teamwork**;
- **training and development** which will improve job satisfaction and give higher quality service delivery.

QUALITY OF SYSTEMS
47 Good people will not be able to work effectively to deliver a high quality service unless they are effectively supported by the right facilities and equipment to deliver services to the required specification, and by sound management systems and structures
that are kept up to date. These will enable the authority to plan ahead for new services. They will also define how the authority will monitor delivery, and how it will communicate with customers and staff.

48 Systems and procedures need to exist for all levels of the organisation. The extent to which these are documented will vary from authority to authority. All local authorities will have some key procedures set out in their standing orders and financial regulations. At an operational level, some staff may learn procedures 'on the job', and little will be formally documented. But in other cases procedures may be documented to the standard required by BS 5750 (Quality Assurance).

49 While the complexity and detail of documentation are up to the authority to determine, a common cause of mistakes is that staff are not aware of what should be done, or fail to follow procedures. Procedures should as a minimum address the most important parts of each section's 'business' and clarify responsibilities and the actions to be taken. They should be clearly understood, be understandable and regularly checked through an audit and review process, and kept up to date.

50 The management information and financial control systems of an authority are a key component of this quality service. If financial information is late or inaccurate, or if there is no process for reviewing performance - either at a detailed level or in the wider context of reviews of overall policy services are unlikely to be fully effective. These issues have been addressed in the Commission's Management Papers - Better Financial Management and Performance Review - Managing Services Effectively.

51 Resources - money, people, plant and buildings - are not a direct measure of quality. The cost of a service says nothing about its quality. Doubling the resources does not necessarily improve quality. But the effective use of resources is a vital aspect of quality. A service that costs more than it need, or wastes money, staff or other resources, cannot be a quality service, even if it meets all the customers' needs.

52 While value for money initiatives are sometimes seen in a very narrow context that focuses primarily on cost, true VFM requires questioning whether the required standards of service, or the customers' needs, are being met at an economic price.

53 Inadequate resources can also represent a waste of money. If too little is spent, and the service specification or desired outcome is not achieved, the money is wasted.

**USE OF RECORDS - A CHECK LIST**

| Are there clear financial priorities? | Are VFM comparisons used? |
| Are there sufficient resources of all types to meet the specification? | Is control delegated appropriately? |
| Are these used efficiently? | |

6. RESOURCES
7. **THE QUALITY MAP AND MORE COMPLEX SERVICE RELATIONSHIPS**

**THE QUALITY CHAIN**

54 The quality map and the check-lists explore the issues to be considered in the relationship between the service provider and the user. But front-line service delivery, even for relatively uncomplicated services, depends on support services. For example, the care provided in a hospital ward will depend upon the quality of the ancillary functions - laundry, cleaning and catering. These will depend upon other services such as the maintenance of the plant in the laundry.

55 This hierarchy of services is sometimes referred to as a 'Quality Chain': a linkage of internal or external support services, all of which must be of high quality if the service to the public is also to be of high quality (Exhibit 3). The quality map is equally applicable to identifying and exploring the issues that need to be reviewed between a support service and a front-line service, as it is between the front-line service and its public.

*Exhibit 3*

**A QUALITY CHAIN INSISTS IN REFUSE COLLECTION**

A quality chain consist of a hierarchy of services

56 For example, the provider of a vehicle maintenance service has to find out what its users want, and to inform them of options and costs. There need to be clear standards, perhaps expressed in terms of vehicle availability, and a process for monitoring delivery. The fitters need to be appropriately trained and supported by good systems. And the maintenance service will in turn depend upon the suppliers of components and the provision of effective workshops.

57 Similar issues will arise wherever a service relationship exists, and the map and check-lists can be used to enhance the quality of service throughout the organisation.
ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PROVISION

58 Many public services are no longer directly provided by the local authority, but are provided indirectly. Competitive tendering has split the policy making and standard setting role of the authority from the day to day provision of services. Housing and leisure services are also looking at ways of providing services through supporting private or voluntary agencies, while social and health services are developing an approach that involves dividing the responsibilities for assessing need and determining care (the purchaser) from the tasks of actually providing it (the provider role).

59 These forms of provision all expand the single user-provider relationship into one involving three parties, the user or consumer, the client or purchaser, and the contractor or provider. The user may receive a service through the authority, or from the contractor. And there will also be a service relationship between the authority and the contractor.

60 The quality map can be applied to each of these relationships, and can help to determine the issues that each participant must address. The questions in the check-lists will also help to clarify the responsibilities of each participant and to determine the degree of discretion that each has. The Commission is currently exploring these issues in more depth in a study on the client role, which will be published in 1993.

8. USING THE QUALITY MAP

APPRAISING AND AUDITING QUALITY INITIATIVES

61 Many current quality initiatives or developments cover two or more of the areas in the quality framework, but few cover all. The map can be used to position initiatives and identify potential weaknesses or omissions that will need to be addressed.

62 For example, a performance monitoring system requires:
- That indicators and targets are chosen. This is located in Quality of Specification.
- That performance against these indicators is monitored, and that action is taken when necessary. The area of Quality of Delivery is covered, therefore.
- That there is a management process to ensure that the review takes place. This is in the area of Quality of People and Systems, but only partially covers it.

63 These activities can be plotted on the map, and it can then be seen that communication with the user, staff development or effective use of resources may not be covered in a performance-monitoring process. Other local or national initiatives can be plotted on the Quality Map in a similar way.

QUALITY ASSURANCE (BS 5750)

64 Some authorities have attained and many are considering obtaining certification against BS 5750, either to improve the competitive edge of their DSOs or to demonstrate a commitment to quality. But the implementation of BS 5750 can be expensive, and authorities need to evaluate this expenditure as carefully as they would other major. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives estimated a cost of £6,000 - £10,000 to obtain certification for a small DSO against this standard, and this level of expenditure is likely to be exceeded in many cases, particularly if staff time and the cost of preparing systems and documentation are considered.

65 The Quality Map can be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of BS 5750 (Exhibit 4).

66 A mechanistic approach to the standard will concentrate heavily on 'quality of delivery' and 'quality of people and systems'. A number of its provisions deal with identifying and controlling a defective or 'non conforming' service, and with the quality of people and systems. For example, people's responsibilities must be clearly set out, and people must be trained and competent to do the work. And there must be clear documentation and procedures for delivering the service, which must be up to date, and regularly audited.

67 BS 5750 is less clear about the specification that is adopted, the quality of communication, and the effective use of resources, although part 1, which deals with product or service design, does refer to ensuring that the designed service meets needs.

68 Quality Assurance certification is usually service specific, and the expense of certification for an authority that delivers a large variety of services from many different locations could be very high. Authorities need to review their potential investment in Quality Assurance and external certification as they would any other major investment to ensure that they get value for money. Benefits may lie in intangible areas such as staff morale and motivation.
Exhibit 4  
QUALITY ASSURANCE  
Quality Assurance focuses on people, systems and delivery

Exhibit 5  
CUSTOMER CARE  
Customer care focuses mainly on the way the authority responds to the user

CUSTOMER CARE PROGRAMMES  
69 Customer care programmes vary from authority to authority in their scope, but commonly focus mainly on the way in which the authority responds to the user. This would cover some of the areas covered by 'Quality of Communication', and to a certain extent by 'Quality of Specification' and 'Quality of People' (Exhibit 5, overleaf). The
underlying standards of service, the extent to which they are achieved, the management systems or the underlying value for money of the service may not be addressed.

70 As the Training and Development Division of the Cabinet Office reported on a customer service project involving government agencies, *A superficial approach (e.g. 'smile' campaigns, only training front end staff) will usually result in the longer term in reduced rather than enhanced performance.* An approach using the quality map will clarify these shortcomings so that they can be remedied.

**THE CITIZEN'S CHARTER**

71 The Citizen's Charter sets out the principles of public service:
- Standards - published and displayed, and including staff courtesy
- Openness - about costs, people and achievement
- Information - in comparable form to produce pressure to emulate the best
- Choice - users' views should be sought, to inform decisions about services
- Non-discrimination - including the use of minority languages
- Accessibility - flexible opening hours
- And if things go wrong - redress, and complaints systems

72 These principles are backed up by the Chartermark, which will be awarded to a number of public agencies (including local authorities) who meet the principles described above and show a commitment to value for money. These principles raise issues that are similar to those raised in the quality map.

73 In addition, the Local Government Act, 1992 gives statutory force to some elements of the charter, in particular the publication of performance information.

74 The Audit Commission's new duty to prescribe performance indicators for local authorities, and the duty of local authorities to publish information about their performance, will contribute to improving the quality of services.

75 If local authorities are to publish their performance indicators, they must at least be monitoring against these indicators and setting standards. Plotting these activities on the quality map shows that authorities will begin to cover the Quality of Specification and of Delivery. Publication will provide a vehicle for the authority to communicate with users, and to inform them of the services that are provided, and the standards achieved (Quality of Communication). Nationally, all authorities will have to begin to work on three areas of quality, and to consider effective use of their resources.

76 However, for local authorities, the published performance indicators will only be the start. Service providers will need to communicate with users more widely, on a wider range of performance indicators than those prescribed, to tell people about their policies and standards. And if the charter principle of choice is recognised, users' views will also be sought.

77 Overall, the Citizen's Charter and the associated legislation will be a spur to all authorities to improve the quality of their services.

**9. THE WAY FORWARD**

78 Improving the quality of services provided by an organisation - be it a local council or a health authority requires commitment and leadership from top managers and policy-makers. It is all too easy to go through the motions of assessing the quality of existing services without taking the task seriously. Managers can avoid sensitive issues, or be satisfied too easily with the status quo. Comparisons with other services, whether they are provided by the same authority, other public sector organisations, or in some cases by the private sector, should be used to challenge managers to do better.

79 An organisation that is continually seeking to deliver high-quality services will make full use of all comparative data available. These might be based on the Citizen's Charter performance indicators, government or CIPFA statistics, or more directed initiatives such as the Audit Commission's Quality Exchange service, where the data collected closely follow the elements of the quality map.
Authorities should make sure that every opportunity for improving service quality is seized. This means that every activity should have a manager who will be accountable for the quality of the service, and who will have authority to initiate changes. These managers will need support and encouragement from the top. Unless members, chief executives and other senior managers are serious about the process of continually improving quality, there will be little encouragement for other managers to do likewise. On the other hand, a central management team that carefully reviews the performance and quality of each of its activities will not only identify more opportunities for improving quality, but will also motivate managers further down the line to review and improving quality for themselves.

The quality map puts the local government, health service and central government quality programmes in context, and enables authorities to identify their strengths and weaknesses. It can be used to appraise other quality initiatives, such as the use of local `service contracts' or `charters'. It is equally valid when applied to an external service such as housing, or to the relationship between two departments or internal services, or even to each link in the customer - client, client - contractor relationships that are emerging from CCT and from changes in the NHS.

All management initiatives need to be reviewed against the areas of quality described in the map, to ensure that progress is made on a broad front, and that solutions that are restricted in scope are avoided. If managers and members pay attention to communication with users, specifying standards, monitoring delivery, developing people and systems, and ensuring the effective use of resources, the true quality of services will be improved. Equally importantly the value of local decision making about services will be enhanced.

THE QUALITY EXCHANGE

The Quality Exchange is an information and networking service provided by the Audit Commission exclusively to local authorities. It was launched in 1990, with the object of helping local authorities to improve the performance and quality of their services by collecting and publishing confidential information on the standards being set across the country on the issues identified in this paper, and by highlighting the use being made of operational and management processes. It also provides a unique contact service for local authority managers who want to find out more about results and processes by putting them in touch with staff in other authorities who are achieving high standards or using particular processes.

Reports, available only to local authorities have been issued covering:

1990
- Highways Maintenance
- Street Cleansing
- Street Lighting
- Refuse Collection
- Verge Maintenance
- Gully Cleansing
- Waste Disposal

1991
- Personnel
- Accountancy
- Pay-roll
- Audit
- Exchequer

1992
- Development Control
- Staffing
- Voids
- Rent Collection
- Repairs & Maintenance
- Housing
- Caretaking
- Legal Services
- Allocations
- Homelessness
- Special Needs
- Major Works
- Tenants' & Residents' Groups

Planned topics include: Sports & Recreation, Trading Standards, Property Services and Parks and Open Spaces.

Further information may be obtained from the Audit Commission on 071-828 1212.