

REFUGEE APPEALS TRIBUNAL

***CUSTOMER SERVICE
ACTION PLAN***

2005 - 2007

**Refugee Appeals Tribunal
6/7 Hanover Street East
Dublin 2**

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INTRODUCTION

The Refugee Appeals Tribunal is a statutorily independent body, which came into existence on 20th November 2000. The task of the Tribunal is, briefly, to provide a fair and independent appeal process to persons seeking refugee status, under the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended). Accordingly, in carrying out its functions, the Tribunal has a quasi-judicial role.

This Action Plan is the Tribunal's contribution to the current Government initiative on Customer Service. The focus of the current initiative is on equality and diversity, the customer and the Irish language. The theme of equality and diversity is particularly appropriate to our Office and provides special challenges in the formulation of a Customer Service Action Plan.

In developing this Office, we are committed to ensuring the highest quality of decision making. Decisions on appeals are made by Tribunal Members who have extensive experience in the legal profession. Their work is supported by the staff of the Tribunal. The skills and expertise of both the Tribunal's staff and Members are crucial to the delivery of a quality service to our customers and are updated through an ongoing investment in general and specialised training and development for staff and Members alike.

***John Ryan,
Chairperson,
Refugee Appeals Tribunal***

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TASK STATEMENT FOR THE TRIBUNAL

The task of the Tribunal is to provide a fair and independent appeal process to persons seeking refugee status and to do so:

- in accordance with law;
- with respect for the dignity of the people we meet during the process;
- quickly;
- with the highest standard of professional competence; and
- in a spirit of openness to change in how we manage the process.

DEFINITION OF TRIBUNAL CUSTOMERS

Given the nature of our role, our customer base is highly focused. Clients of the Tribunal include:

- asylum seekers, and their legal representatives, appealing against recommendations of the Refugee Applications Commissioner,
- staff of the offices and agencies in the asylum area, such as the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner and the Refugee Legal Service
- the media.

In addition, the Tribunal has a customer base from its international contacts and obligations:

- United Nations Institutions, in particular UNHCR; and
- other governmental and non-governmental interest groups.

We also have two groups of internal customers:

- Tribunal staff and staff representatives; and
- Tribunal Members.

SERVICE COMMITMENT

The **Refugee Appeals Tribunal** is committed to serving its customer base by :

- **Delivering Quality Service Standards**

- Developing and publishing a Customer Service Charter which outlines the nature and quality of service which customers can expect. This charter will contain the principles described under the “Principles for Dealing with Customers” section of this document. It will be known and owned by staff and Tribunal Members.

- **Operating with Timeliness and Courtesy**

- Delivering quality services with courtesy, sensitivity and the minimum of delay, fostering a climate of mutual respect between provider and customer.
- Giving contact names in all communications to ensure ease of ongoing transactions.

- **Respecting Equality and Diversity**

- Given the nature of the Tribunal’s work as a place of appeal for non-nationals seeking refugee status, respect for equality and diversity is a core value. We will continue to ensure this has a central place in all aspects of the Tribunal’s work.

- **Ensuring the Physical Comfort of our Customers**

- Providing clean, accessible public offices that ensure privacy, comply with occupational and safety standards and, as part of this, facilitate access for people with disabilities and others with specific needs.

- **Providing Timely Information**

- Taking a proactive approach to providing information that is easily accessible, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact and meets the requirements of our customers.

- **Staff Training**

- Providing adequate and relevant training to Tribunal staff and Members to ensure that they are empowered to deliver a quality service

- **Seirbhís trí Ghaeilge**

- Tabharfar freagra i nGaeilge ar chomhfreagras a gheofar i nGaeilge.
- Déanfar gach iarracht freastal ar fhiafraithe teileafóin i nGaeilge agus freastal ar dhaoine a thagann i láthair ar mian leo a ngnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge.

- **Service through Irish**

- Correspondence received in Irish will be answered in Irish.
- Every effort will be made to accommodate telephone callers and personal callers who wish to conduct their business through Irish.

PRINCIPLES FOR DEALING WITH CUSTOMERS

To help ensure a consistently high standard of service, we will adopt the following **principles for dealing with customers**.

- **Telephone**
 - ◆ A "**lo-call 1890**" number is now available to allow members of the public to contact the Tribunal from any part of the country. The number is 1890 201 458.
 - ◆ All calls will be answered **promptly and courteously**. Staff will identify themselves to the caller.
 - ◆ **Voice mail will be used with discretion**. Its purpose is to allow callers to leave a message outside normal office hours or if staff are unavoidably absent.
 - ◆ If a staff member is **unable to deal with a telephone query**, he/she will attempt to **transfer the call to someone who can**. If this is not possible, arrangements will be made to have the call returned by the relevant member of staff.

- **Correspondence (including e-mail and fax messages)**

We will reply to all letters courteously and as soon as possible and we will work towards achieving the following standards:

 - ◆ **Acknowledging all correspondence** / e-mail / fax messages within 7 working days of receipt.
 - ◆ **Issuing a substantive response** to all correspondence, requiring a detailed reply, within 20 working days of receipt of the information where the information required is available. We will, however, always receive some correspondence which will require consultation with offices/agencies associated with the Tribunal and/or considerable research of a legal nature before a full response can be issued.
 - ◆ Arrangements are in place to **ensure that mail does not go unanswered** when individual staff members are absent.
 - ◆ Written communications issuing from the Tribunal will normally **include the staff member's name**, division and telephone extension, and e-mail address (where relevant).
 - ◆ All correspondence will be written in **plain language**, using technical and official terms only where this is absolutely necessary.
 - ◆ The Tribunal's '**Customer Service Charter**' in the languages of our clients will be available in leaflet form, and on display, in the reception area of our offices.

- **Personal Callers**
 - ◆ All callers to the building will be greeted politely and with courtesy.
 - ◆ Private office accommodation is available where callers may consult their legal representatives.
 - ◆ When **personal callers** arrive by prior appointment, an appropriate staff member will **greet them punctually**.
 - ◆ The Tribunal's offices have been made as accessible as possible to people with disabilities.
 - ◆ All areas open to personal callers will be maintained to **acceptable standards of cleanliness and comfort**.

CUSTOMER SERVICE CONSULTATION

It is vitally important that services are and remain relevant and responsive to the changing needs of the Tribunal's customers. Consultation is the key to understanding the needs and expectations of individuals and groups - internal and external to the organisation.

- **Internet**
- The Tribunal has its own World Wide Web site (www.refappeal.ie).
- The possibilities offered by the Internet to disseminate information of use to our customer base have been harnessed to the greatest possible extent.

- **Representative Groups**
- The Tribunal fosters liaison meetings with key statutory and voluntary groups working in the asylum area as necessary.

- **Staff**
- The concepts in this plan will be promoted among staff by management, not exclusively by formal training.
- All staff will be encouraged to listen to customer comments, note any perceived deficiencies in service delivery and provide feedback to the appropriate line manager.
- Staff will also be encouraged to make recommendations which would contribute positively to the customer service being offered to external and internal clients.

SETTING STANDARDS

Keeping to a clear standard of delivery is the hallmark of quality customer service. The Tribunal will therefore monitor the standards established in this plan, and develop additional standards on an ongoing basis as the need arises.

Our customer service approach is therefore based on the following principles:

- clear, quality standards; and
- regular review of service delivery.

DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

As befits a customer-oriented organisation, the Tribunal will adopt a positive attitude towards all comments or complaints relating to customer service.

The scope for customer dissatisfaction will be reduced as far as possible by maintaining excellent standards and by well-focused staff training programmes.

The Tribunal will also put in place a formal system to ensure that complaints relating to customer service are dealt with in a consistent, open and fair manner. The Tribunal's decision

making process is explicitly excluded from this system, as such decisions are confidential and an applicant has a right of judicial review to the High Court.

Customer Liaison Officer

The Tribunal has nominated **Mr. Peter Lumsden, Assistant Principal, Corporate Services** as its **Customer Liaison Officer** and he will serve as the contact person to whom individuals should be directed if they have a complaint relating to customer service in the Refugee Appeals Tribunal.

The Customer Liaison Officer will also arrange to process complaints/comments which may be received, whether formally or informally, by other staff members.

Complaints Procedure

When a complaint is received by a staff member, it is recorded on a preprinted form and forwarded to the Customer Liaison Officer who should issue a formal acknowledgement within five working days.

The Customer Liaison Officer will ask the Assistant Principal of the relevant section to investigate the details of the complaint. Where the complaint relates to a matter within the remit of the Corporate Services function he will investigate it personally.

A reply should normally be sent by the Customer Liaison Officer to the complainant within 20 working days.

All complaints will be logged and analysed by the Customer Liaison Officer, and the results disseminated throughout the organisation.

Information regarding the complaints procedure will be circulated widely to people and organisations in regular contact with the Tribunal, and access to the procedure will be kept as simple as possible.

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