

*Citizen-Centred Service*

# *Citizens First*

## Summary Report

Prepared by

*Erin Research Inc.*

for the

CITIZEN-CENTRED SERVICE NETWORK  
CANADIAN CENTRE FOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT

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# CITIZENS FIRST

## SUMMARY REPORT

### The Challenge

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*Citizens First* is a research initiative of the Citizen-Centred Service Network (CCSN), a network of more than 200 service quality leaders from the federal, provincial and municipal governments brought together by the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD).

On behalf of CCMD and CCSN, Erin Research conducted an independent investigation of how Canadians perceive the services that their governments provide. The survey was completed by a random selection of 2,900 Canadians in the spring of 1998, and is representative of the population with respect to age, gender and region.

*Citizens First* defines three new perspectives on service quality:

- *It challenges the widely held view that government services are second rate by showing how recent polls have underrated citizens' perceptions of government services;*
- *It defines the five elements of service delivery that most strongly affect citizens' perceptions of service delivery;*
- *It offers managers and service providers clear direction for improving services.*

# Highlights

*Citizens First* reports how Canadians perceive the services of governments at the municipal, provincial and federal levels and gives clear direction for improving service quality. Major findings are:

- Contrary to popular belief, Canadians rate the quality of many government services as high or higher than private sector services.
- Overall, citizens rate the quality of *specific* government services higher than government services *in general*. Failing to differentiate these ways of defining service has led to unrealistically low estimates of government service quality in the past.
- Citizens understand that government has a more difficult role than the private sector, balancing efficiency with the public interest. However, they still expect the quality of government services to be as high or higher than that of private sector services.
- Citizens' assessments of service quality are determined primarily by five factors: timeliness, knowledge and competence of staff, courtesy/comfort, fair treatment, and outcome. When all of these drivers of service quality are present, citizens give maximum ratings to government services, often higher than 80 on a scale of 0-100. When performance falls below threshold value on any one of these dimensions, service quality scores drop markedly. The chief constraint on achieving maximum ratings is that governments cannot always guarantee citizens the outcome they want. Setting realistic expectations is an important task in these situations.
- Telephone problems – busy phone lines, difficulties with voice mail and unhelpful phone directory listings – are the most frequent obstacles that citizens encounter in accessing government services.
- The need to contact multiple government offices for a single service issue arises most frequently around certificates, licences and registration. These contacts are often triggered by milestones in life such as getting a new job, going away to university, getting married, a death in the family, or moving.
- Citizens have measurable expectations around timely service. *Citizens First* reports specific standards for four types of routine transaction: telephone, counter service, mail and e-mail.
- Citizens identified priorities for improved service at each level of government:
  - *Municipal*: public health, road maintenance and public schools
  - *Provincial*: hospitals, colleges and universities
  - *Federal*: Employment Insurance, Canada Employment Centres, the justice system, Revenue Canada, Canada Post, and Canada Pension/Old Age Security.

These results are cause for great optimism. They provide a means to raise service quality scores from their present average in the low 60s toward 80 or more. Governments at all levels can use these results to develop their own action strategies and chart the path forward.

# Setting the Record Straight

It is a popular belief that government services are considered to be of poorer quality than private sector services. This negative view of government service is supported by relatively little hard evidence, but it lessens public esteem for government institutions and services and erodes morale within the public service.

To put this notion to the test, citizens rated the quality of service they receive from 24 public and private organizations. The comparison is based on a wider range of both private and public services than previous Canadian studies of its kind, and the results cast government services in a different light. A cluster of public services tops the ratings (fire departments, public libraries), followed by alternating private and public services, singly or in small groups.

These findings effectively counter the view that government services are necessarily of poor quality. They are not. In fact, public sector services occupy a wide range along the service quality continuum and are intermixed with private scores over much of this range.

Figure 1 provides some insight into understanding how the myth of poor government service has developed. Consider the entries for government services “in general.” These scores – 47 out of 100 for the federal and provincial governments, and 53 out of 100 for municipal governments – replicate the familiar and discouraging results of recent polls.

**Figure 1**  
**How Do Public and Private Services Compare?**  
***Citizens First, 1998***

Service	Service quality	Service	Service quality
Fire departments	78	Canada Post	55
Public libraries	75	Insurance agencies	55
Supermarkets	74	Public transit	55
Private mail carriers	68	Municipal gov't. services	
CTV	66	in general	53
Provincial parks, campgrounds	64	Banks	51
CBC	64	Revenue Canada	50
Police	63	Federal gov't. services	
Provincial electric utilities	63	in general	47
Telephone companies	63	Provincial gov't. services	
Private sector services		in general	47
in general	60	Public education system	47
Passport office	60	Hospitals	46
Taxis	57	Road maintenance	35

Service quality scale ranges from 0 to 100.

The root of the problem is that polls have defined public sector services generically as “government services,” while they have listed private sector services specifically – “my bank” or “my department store,” and so on.

When people rate services that *they have used recently* and that are *defined specifically*, their service quality ratings are higher than their ratings for services in general. *Citizens First* provides two clear illustrations of this.

First, scores for the specific services associated with each level of government are generally higher than the

corresponding generic scores. For example, fire departments, libraries and public transit all score higher than “municipal services in general.” In all, ten public sector services score higher than their generic entries, while only three score lower.

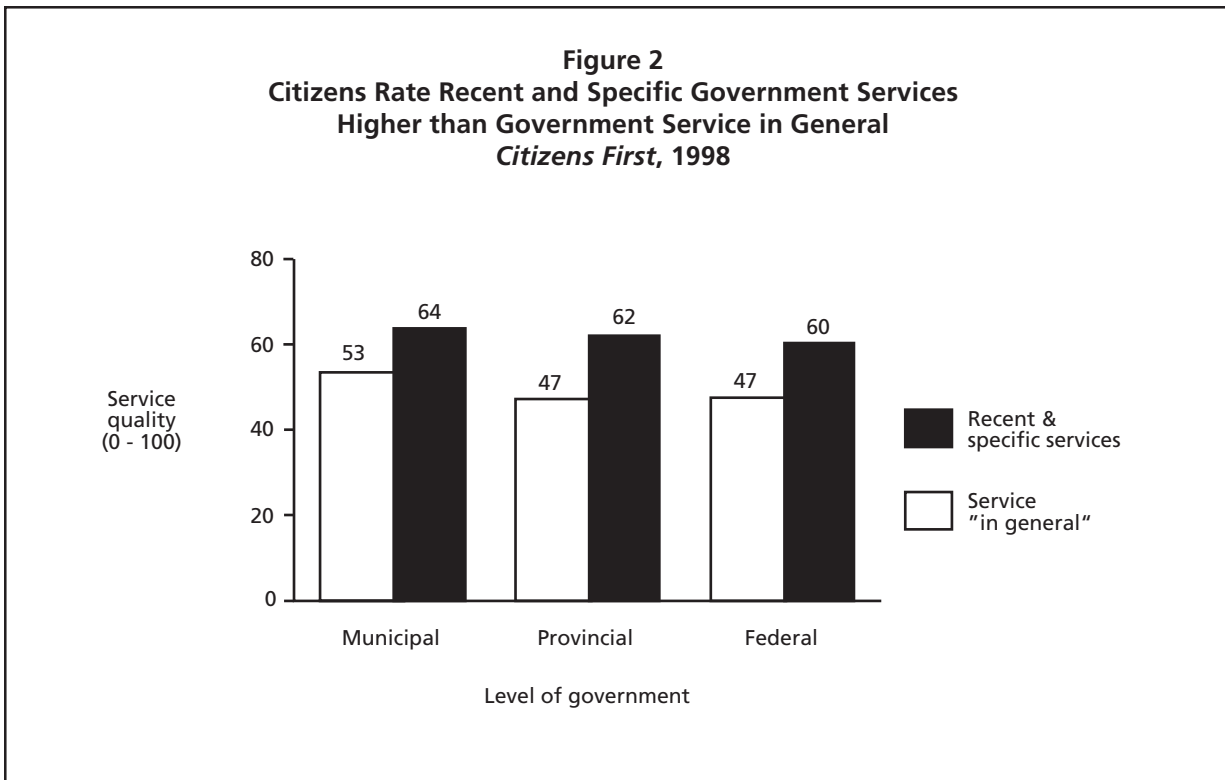
A stronger test derives from citizens’ ratings of 50 specific services spanning the three levels of government. Citizens rated only services that they had used in the past year, so these evaluations are based on relatively recent experience. The 20 provincial services in this set have a mean service quality rating of 62 out of 100, fully 15 points higher than the general rating for “provincial govern-

ment services in general.” Municipal and federal governments show the same pattern, with recent specific services scoring 11 and 13 points higher than government services in general (Figure 2).

When citizens evaluate services they have used recently, they draw on

particular memories of actual experiences. The result is a wide range of scores for different government services that is similar to the range of scores generated for private sector services. When citizens rate government services in general, they draw on opinions and possibly stereotypes of government; these

tend to be negative, as this research and many other surveys have amply demonstrated. A meaningful comparison of government and private sector services must account for any differences in specificity and recency of use.





# The Service Model

The service model developed from the research results has five phases, summarized in the diagram on the next page.

## **CITIZENS FIRST SERVICE MODEL**

### **1. Citizens' service needs and expectations**

When citizens approach a government service they bring expectations based on earlier service experiences and also on more general attitudes toward government.

### **2. Access to service**

To get the service, the citizen must know where to find it. This may be difficult if it is the citizen's first experience with the service or if the service has changed as a result of government restructuring.

After making initial contact, access problems can continue if, for example, the phones are busy or the citizen receives conflicting information.

### **3. Service delivery**

When obtaining a service, citizens assess government performance along many dimensions. Service delivery is timely or it is not, staff are competent or they are not, and so on. Citizens' responses to questions about service delivery point to five key elements that drive service quality ratings. When all five drivers are in place, citizens rate many services in the 80s; when one or more drops below a threshold level, service quality ratings fall accordingly.

*Timely service* is the single strongest determinant of service quality across all services and across the three levels of government. The research provides standards for timely service delivery in routine phone, counter service, mail and e-mail transactions.

### **4. Perceptions of service quality**

Specific service experiences lead to detailed perceptions of service quality. These provide useful information for improving service.

Specific service experiences may also contribute to citizens' perceptions of government service *in general*. These are considerably more negative than perceptions of most specific experiences. The widely held belief that governments provide poor quality service rests largely on polls that measure service at this general level.

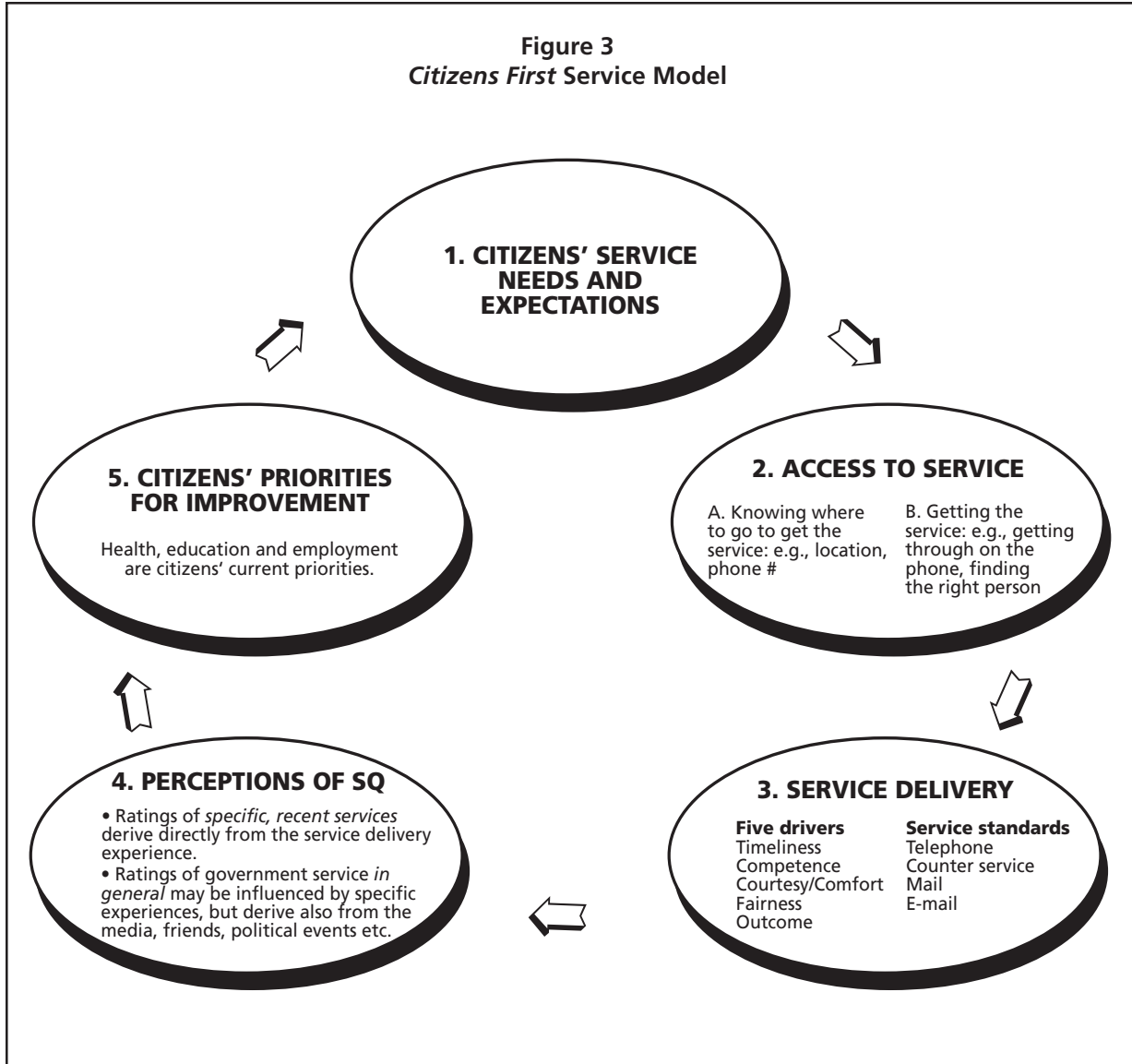
### **5. Citizens' priorities for improvement**

Perceptions of service quality contribute to citizens' priorities for improving service.

Priorities for improvement may also be influenced by the larger arena of public discourse, including politicians, opinion leaders and the media.

Priorities for improvement, in their turn, help to shape citizens' expectations when they next encounter government services.

Figure 3  
Citizens First Service Model



# Citizens' Service Needs and Expectations

Citizens seek government services in response to a need, and this need is accompanied by an expectation of what they will receive. Citizens' expectations provide an important context for approaching the public sector service challenge. Indeed, the research indicates that citizens appreciate the complexity of government; 54 percent agree that "Governments have a more difficult task than the private sector – they must protect the public interest as well as meet the needs of citizens."

Despite the difficulty of the task, however, citizens expect govern-

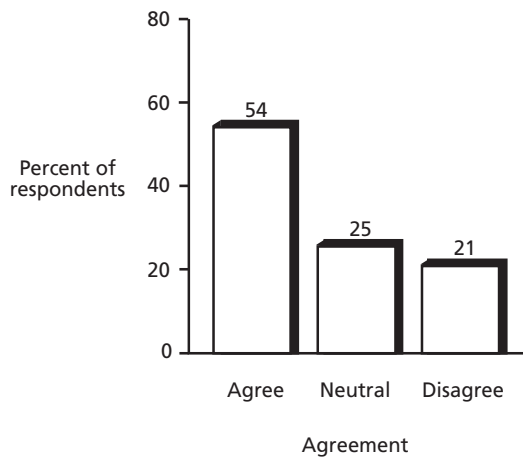
ment to provide stellar service. Forty-two percent stated that governments should provide even better service than the private sector, and more than half want governments to provide service on a par with the private sector. Only five percent allowed governments a lower level of service than the private sector.

The dynamics of service quality differ significantly in public and private contexts. Governments must not only safeguard the rights of the individual but also protect the larger public good. Governments impose

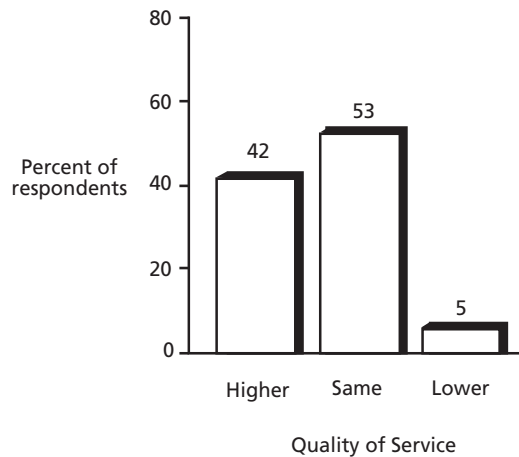
requirements on citizens that may not be popular, such as taxes and permits. Above all, governments must be even-handed and fair. By contrast, private companies think primarily of their own competitive situation. They typically direct their appeals at carefully defined market segments and are free to give preferred customers better treatment than others. For these reasons, the focus of this study is intentionally on citizens rather than on customers or clients.

**Figure 4**  
**Citizens' Expectations of Government Service**  
*Citizens First, 1998*

*"Governments have a more difficult task than the private sector – they must protect the public interest as well as meet the needs of citizens."*



*"What quality of service you get from government, compared to the private sector?"*



# Access to Service

To elicit information on citizens' experience with access and service delivery, citizens were asked to choose an experience with government service within the past year and to answer an extensive set of questions about it. Citizens described a wide range of experiences with all three levels of government, and the resulting data provide a comprehensive overview of citizens' contacts with government.

Access begins with knowing where to go to get the service. In describing their chosen service experience, 75 percent of citizens knew where to get the service they needed, while 25 percent did not.

Knowing where to go to get the service does not eliminate subsequent problems around access, but it certainly reduces their number. Among those who knew where to go, 45 percent reported no problems at all, and another 24 percent identified just one problem from the list of 10 common access problems (see Figure 5). On average, this group had 1.3 problems accessing their chosen service.

By contrast, when citizens did not know how to obtain the service, only 12 percent had no problems with access. An additional 14 percent had a single problem, leaving three-quarters of this group with two or more difficulties in accessing the service. On average, this group had 3.0 access problems.

**Figure 5  
Barriers to Access  
Citizens First, 1998**

Barriers to access	Percent of respondents
Telephone lines were busy	28
I got bounced from one person to another	25
I got conflicting information	21
Trouble with voice mail or answering system	21
I received incorrect information	14
No one took time to explain things	13
Parking was difficult	13
I couldn't find it in the phone book	9
I didn't know where to look	9
I had to travel too far	7
Other	13

Telephone problems are the most common barrier. Forty percent of all respondents reported one or more phone-related problems. These include busy phone lines, trouble with voice mail or automatic answering systems, and being unable to find the service in the phone book.

## **MULTIPLE-CONTACT EXPERIENCES AND SINGLE-WINDOW SERVICE**

Single-window access is a quintessential feature of the citizen-centred approach. It organizes service delivery or information about services around the needs of citizens rather than around the administrative structures of governments.

Single-window service is clearly a benefit in situations where citizens must contact several government offices for a single service need, for example, having to first obtain a birth certificate in order to get a passport.

*Citizens First* examines, across the full spectrum of services and governments, the events that most frequently trigger multiple-contact experiences and the offices that are most frequently contacted. The questionnaire asked, simply, whether citizens had contacted more than one government office to get a service, what the service was, and what offices they had contacted.

For the Canadian population as a whole, the leading trigger of

multiple-contact service experiences, by a wide margin, is the need for a certificate, licence or other type of personal paperwork. This registration function prompted 39 percent of all multiple-contact experiences!

Many of the events that trigger the need for certificates are major milestones in life, such as starting a new job, going away to university, getting married, a death in the family, or moving, especially from one province to another. These events engender changes of address, changes of name, or the need for passports, birth certificates, SIN cards, new health cards, and so on.

The offices most frequently contacted in multiple-contact experiences include all those that issue the certificates, cards and licences in question. However, the single most frequently contacted office is Revenue Canada. Twenty-nine percent of multiple-contact experiences required communication with Revenue Canada. The next most frequently contacted office cluster related to birth, marriage and death certificates; this was involved in 19 percent of cases.

The three options can be seen as complementary. A single-window centre can be accessed by phone or

Internet, and can assign one person to assist the citizen with different phases of the service request.

These results point to a great opportunity for vertical and horizontal integration, particularly for the federal and provincial governments. At the broadest level, for all services and all governments, certificates and registration are key triggers for multiple-contact experiences.

## SOLUTIONS FOR MULTIPLE-CONTACT EXPERIENCES

Citizens indicated whether various solutions would improve service in the case of their specific multiple-contact experience. Close to two-thirds chose each of the following:

1. A “one-stop” centre that offers all the services you need in one location;
2. The ability to do all or most tasks by mail, phone, Internet, etc., without visiting government offices;
3. Having one person to guide me through the system and help if I have a problem.

# Service Delivery

## FIVE CORNERSTONES OF SERVICE QUALITY

For almost every type of government service, some citizens rate the service quality they experience as very poor, some rate it as very good, and most rate it somewhere in between. What is it that underlies this range of ratings?

The present research examined several possibilities. Demographic factors (age, gender, income, education, etc.) have a negligible impact. Citizens' attitudes toward governments have some influence, in that those with a positive attitude toward government rate the quality of services somewhat higher than those with a negative outlook.

However, *Citizens First* found that by far the strongest determinants of service quality ratings are elements of the service-delivery process itself. The survey assessed more than 30 aspects of service delivery, and many of them are related to service quality. Five of these determine service quality scores in a strong and consistent manner. They are drivers of service quality.<sup>1</sup>

## DRIVERS OF SERVICE QUALITY

Driver	Survey measure
Timeliness	"How satisfied were you with the time it took to get the service?"
Knowledge, competence	"Staff were knowledgeable and competent."
Courtesy, comfort	"Staff were courteous and made me feel comfortable."
Fair treatment	"I was treated fairly."
Outcome	"In the end, did you get what you needed?"

When citizens experienced good service on each of these dimensions, they rated overall service quality at 85 out of 100. ("Good" service is defined as a rating of either 4 or 5 out of 5. Perfect 5s are not required.)

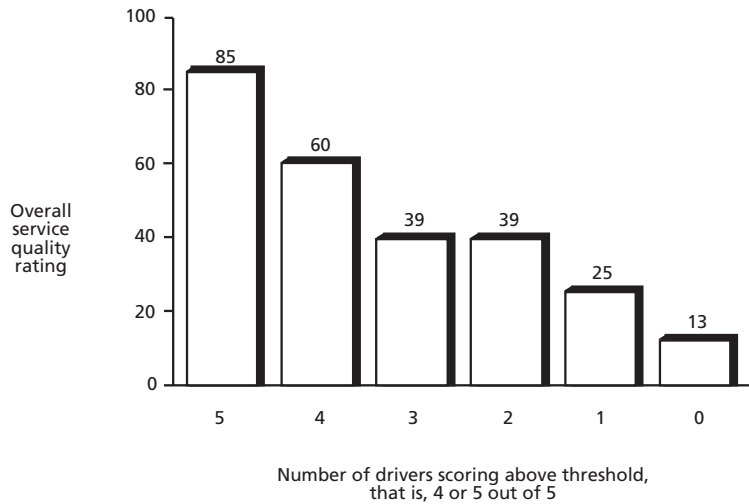
When service drops below the threshold of 4 out of 5 on any one of the five drivers, overall service quality scores fall an average of 25 points,

to 60 out of 100. If two drivers score less than the threshold, service quality scores fall below 50.

*These results show that providing "Good" service on the five drivers – i.e., service that citizens judge 4 out of 5 or better – will result in service quality ratings in the range of 85 out of 100 in most contexts.*

<sup>1</sup> Together, these five elements account for 72 percent of the variance in overall service quality. This is a very large amount of variance to have accounted for – getting 25 to 30 percent would be sufficient to confidently define a service-improvement strategy. Accounting for 70 percent is approaching the practical limit of explanation in social scientific research, as "noise" factors such as differences in understanding questions and differences in interpreting response scales keep the maximum figure well under 100 percent.

**Figure 6**  
**Impact of Drivers on Service Quality**  
**Based on All Services of Municipal, Provincial and**  
**Federal Governments**  
*Citizens First, 1998*



The principal limitation to achieving service quality ratings in the 80s is that governments cannot always deliver on the fifth driver: they cannot always provide citizens with the outcome that they seek. The provincial park may be full for the weekend, for example, or the application for financial assistance may not meet

requirements. This imposes a ceiling on service quality scores for those who are denied the outcome they want. The desired outcome will be denied more often in areas such as financial assistance, employment and taxation. Here, government's challenge is to manage expectations related to outcome.

These results provide a solid foundation for optimism. *High service quality ratings are possible for government services.* The findings also issue a challenge: governments must find cost-effective ways of delivering the level of service that will produce and sustain these high service quality scores.

### **SERVICE STANDARDS**

*Timely service is the single strongest determinant of service quality.* This is conclusively demonstrated by several lines of evidence in the present research. Moreover, when describing specific experiences with government service, only 51 percent of citizens stated that they were satisfied with the time it took to get the service they needed.

To learn how citizens define timely service, the survey presented a set of questions on acceptable levels of service in routine transactions. The results, summarized on the next page, provide measurable targets that can be readily reported back to citizens and staff.

## SERVICE STANDARDS FOR ROUTINE TRANSACTIONS

### 1. Telephone

How many minutes is it acceptable to wait for a government representative?

- 97 percent find a 30-second wait acceptable.

What is the maximum number of people you should have to deal with?

- 85 percent find two people acceptable.

If you leave a telephone voice message at 10:00 a.m., what is an acceptable time to wait for a return call?

- 75 percent find four hours acceptable.

### 2. Counter Service

How many minutes is it acceptable to wait in any line?

- 68 percent find five minutes acceptable.

What is the maximum number of people you should have to deal with?

- 82 percent find two people acceptable.

### 3. Mail

What is an acceptable time to allow for a mailed reply?

- 87 percent find two weeks acceptable.

### 4. E-mail

If you e-mail a government office by 10:00 a.m., what is an acceptable time to wait for a reply?

- 90 percent find four hours acceptable.



# Perceptions of Service Quality

The drivers of service quality allow us to explain why, on an individual basis, people rate particular service experiences high or low. Overall service quality scores are a direct consequence of how citizens perceive performance with respect to timeliness, competence, courtesy/comfort, fairness and outcome.

The drivers also explain why certain types of service should rate higher or lower than others. A favourable outcome can be guaranteed to almost every citizen in certain service areas (getting a passport or a library book), but to fewer in other areas (financial assistance, employment services). Despite the best efforts of government staff, citizens may feel distinctly uncomfortable in certain encounters with police, taxation agencies or social assistance offices. Timeliness can presumably be improved in many service areas, but with services such as property zoning, the process that guarantees input from interested parties draws out the time frame.

As a result of this, service quality ratings for government services will vary in two important ways.

First, each type of service has different built-in limitations. The upper limit on service quality ratings that can realistically be expected will vary across services. Ratings in the 80s may be a realistic target for many service areas, but they will not be possible for all. Tax collectors face barriers that fire departments do not. It follows that services should compare their performance with like services in other jurisdictions, and not necessarily with services that rate high in an absolute sense.

Second, each service will have a particular “driver profile” – some drivers will score relatively high and some will score lower. By way of example, citizens who provided information on registration services (birth certificates, SIN cards, drivers’ licences, etc.) gave these services a mean service quality rating of 60 out of 100. Outcome was not a salient

issue, in that more than 90 percent got what they wanted. Timeliness was a problem, in that only 46 percent rated performance on this driver at or above the threshold of 4 out of 5. By contrast, the group of more recreational services, including libraries, museums, parks and others, had a significantly higher mean score for overall service quality: 75 out of 100. Slightly fewer respondents (84 percent) were happy with the outcome, but more (70 percent) rated timeliness at or above the 4-out-of-5 threshold.

It follows that each service should examine its performance on the five drivers individually. If a significant proportion of citizens rate some dimension low and there is no inherent limitation on that driver, then improvement on that dimension is warranted.

# Priorities for Improvement

Citizens indicated their priorities for improving service by selecting three services from each level of government from a set of 50 widely used services. Most of those selected are functions that play an important role in people's lives.

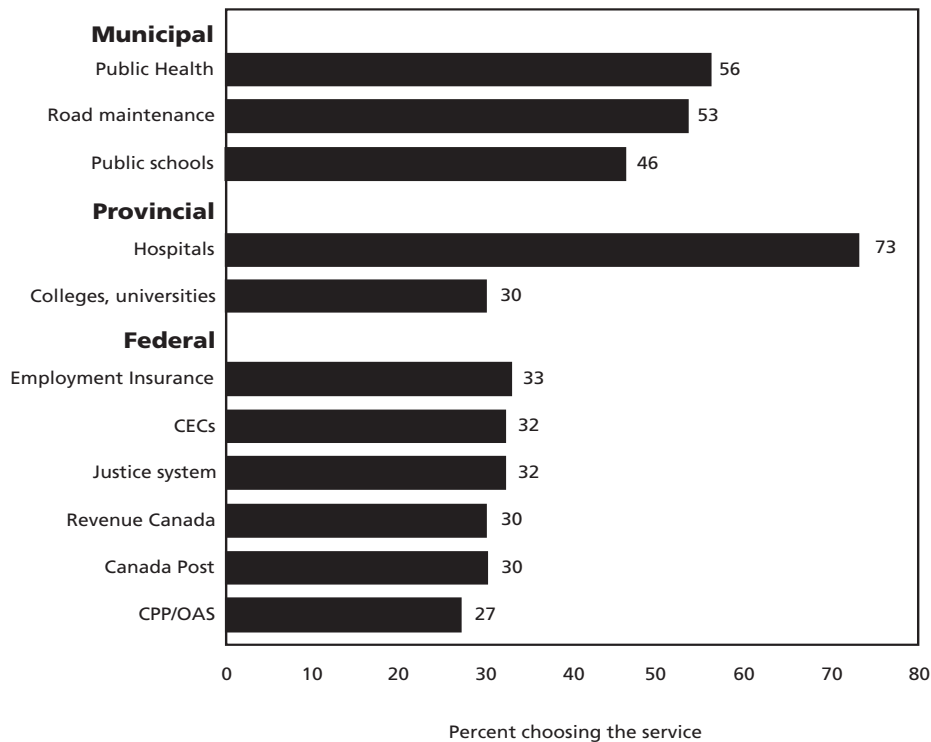
At the municipal level there is a clear consensus as to the three top priorities for improvement. *Public health*

and *road maintenance* were both listed by more than half the respondents, and *public schools* (often a joint municipal/provincial responsibility) follow close behind.

At the provincial level, *hospitals* stand out as the highest priority by a wide margin. *Colleges and universities* follow.

Among federal services, there is no single outstanding priority for improvement. Six services all rank within a few percentage points: *Employment Insurance*, *Canada Employment Centres (CECs)*, the *federal justice system*, *Revenue Canada*, *Canada Post* and *Canada Pension Plan/Old Age Security (CPP/OAS)*.

**Figure 7**  
**Citizens' Priorities for Improvement**  
*Citizens First, 1998*



Note: Responsibility for some services varies across Canada, and is shared among levels of government.

# The Path Forward

*Citizens First* can help governments chart a path forward on service quality. The study's findings are grounded in the experience of Canadians with services of all three levels of government in every province and territory.

## THE PATH FORWARD

Results of *Citizens First* point to the seven goal areas. Governments can select from, adapt, and build on the array of strategies suggested under each goal. Some of the suggested strategies have already been implemented by different governments.

1. **Build strong leadership to champion citizen-centred service delivery throughout the public sector.**
  - Promote the vision and principles of a citizen-centred public service.
  - Establish senior intergovernmental teams committed to implementation of citizen-centred service.
  - Engage all managers and staff in the service delivery challenge by integrating citizen-centred service principles and activities into business plans, accountability measures and performance evaluations.
  - Recruit partners from the private sector and organizations outside government to build momentum.
  
2. **Improve citizens' access to services.**
  - Pilot innovative solutions to access barriers such as the telephone.
  - Pilot partnerships between and within governments to provide single-window access in high priority areas.
  - Publish successful single-window solutions.
  - Continue to build solutions and best practices around access that optimize the use of human resources and technology.
  
3. **Focus service delivery improvements on the five essential cornerstones of service quality, namely timeliness, knowledge/competence, courtesy/comfort, fair treatment and outcome.**
  - Conduct pilot projects particularly to improve timeliness by making optimal use of technology and by partnering with the community.
  - Investigate barriers to providing timely service, such as cost cutting, lack of training, lack of technology or insufficient internal support services.
  - Develop model training programs to deliver timely, competent, courteous and fair service, and to manage citizens' expectations concerning outcomes.
  - Seek staff recommendations and empower staff to deliver on the five key service elements.

4. **Establish service standards for routine transactions.**
  - Establish standards for routine telephone, mail, e-mail and in-person transactions to staff and to citizens.
  - Pilot public-public and public-private partnerships to develop innovative and cost-effective solutions to service standard challenges, e.g., technological solutions in high transaction areas.
  - Reward staff excellence in attaining and exceeding standards.
  - Establish effective mechanisms for resolving citizens' problems.
  - Measure performance on service standards and report back to staff and citizens.
  - Establish individual standards for major non-routine services.
  
5. **Target improvement efforts on citizens' top priorities in high transaction areas.**
  - Conduct innovative pilot projects in high transaction and high priority areas such as health care, employment and education.
  - Communicate successful case studies of municipal, provincial and federal governments in the high priority areas.
  - Monitor public and private sector services against benchmarks established in the 1998 survey.
  
6. **Communicate the results of this and other research to build morale and promote action on citizens' priorities.**
  - Communicate results of *Citizens First* research to citizens and service providers.
  - Disseminate research tools, such as the Common Measurements Tool developed by the Citizen-Centred Service Network, that can be readily applied to many service areas.
  
7. **Become a global leader in citizen-centred service and research.**
  - Conduct regular research to identify changing needs and priorities, and measure against the 1998 baseline.
  - Establish a sustained capacity to pioneer research, training and promote broad implementation.
  - Develop management tools that provide best practices, successful case examples and specific guidance in measurement, e.g., video, quick reference guide, etc.
  - Establish an Internet clearing-house for innovative service solutions and research.
  - Support the CCSN practitioner network in developing and sharing innovative solutions to citizen service.
  - Pilot linkages with Canadian university, private and volunteer sectors and internationally to advance citizen-centred service.