

# IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY IN THE NEW PUBLIC SECTOR

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## **Introduction**

Public sector reform movements around the world in the 1990s, codified as New Public Management (NPM) have been aimed at ‘fostering a performance-oriented culture in a less centralised public sector’ (OECD, 1995). Such reforms are characterised by key elements including increasing use of markets and competition in the provision of public services (e.g., contracting out and other market-type mechanisms) and increasing emphasis on performance, outputs and customer orientation. One consequence of these reforms has been the reorientation of public services towards their consumers. This has brought with it pressure for better quality public services, from service users as their needs change and their expectations rise in respect of how well services can be performed (Flynn, 1995). Furthermore, increased service user choice such as that occurring in the UK National Health Service (Vidler and Clarke, 2005) forces public service providers to consider how to deliver high quality public services both efficiently and effectively, generating best value (Martin, 2002). In some instances this requirement is underpinned by statutory guidance. For

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example, the UK Government's Best Value policy was designed to 'secure improvements in quality as well as in cost' (Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998, p.57). As a result, high quality service is a priority for public service providers worldwide (Borins, 2000) and service quality improvement has become a very real issue for new public management (Edvardsson and Enquist, 2006).

The resulting focus on service quality improvement has forced public service managers to engage with the measurement of service quality. They have had to become involved increasingly in assessing satisfaction of both external and internal customers - service users as well as deliverers of services (Farnham and Horton, 1993). This has resulted in the extensive use of satisfaction surveys in the public sector (Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996). However, whilst it is clear that performance measurement of economy and efficiency is well developed in the public service context, there is less evidence of performance indicators relating to effectiveness or quality (Black et al., 2001), or measures that fully reflect the constructs of service quality (Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996). Furthermore, although there is no shortage of views on survey-based instruments such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1985) for measuring service quality and customer satisfaction, there is disagreement over whether the prime purpose of such instruments is to provide an accurate measure of service quality (their predictive ability) or identify specific reasons for quality issues (their diagnostic ability) (Robinson, 1999). Indeed, Brysland and Curry

(2001) question the applicability of such instruments specifically in relation to quality improvement within a public service context.

In this chapter we report on an alternative qualitative approach to the measurement of service quality, the Extended Service Template Process (Williams and Saunders, 2006) and evaluate its ability to enable agendas for service quality improvement in a public service context. The Extended Service Template Process (ESTP) not only allows the views of the users and deliverers of a service to be captured separately in their own words and recorded visually but also enables them to be explored, understood and owned, as a precursor to joint development of an improvement agenda.

This chapter commences with a brief review of the context for approaches to measuring service quality in public services, highlighting issues associated with use and interpretation of generic quantitative measures such as the questionnaire to service users. The ESTP is outlined and its application evaluated in relation to three distinct UK based public service situations: the main reception service of a large multi-site organisation; the provision of funding to develop social housing and dissertation supervision in a new university business school. Within the evaluation, particular attention is given to the extent to which facets of the service encounter or relationship considered important by service users and deliverers are measured, the development of shared understandings and the process's utility in enabling quality improvement. The

chapter concludes with observations on the value of the ESTP in relation the drivers for quality improvement in public services.

### **The New Public Management and the context for service quality improvement**

Pollitt (2002) acknowledges that New Public Management reforms around the world are underpinned by some common aims and features. These include the production of effective, efficient and responsive services by public service organisations which are close to their customers, a commitment to continuous quality improvements and the empowerment of staff to innovate. More recently, government modernisation agendas place growing emphasis on collaboration and partnerships as means by which such aims can be realised (Newman, 2002). Indeed, Entwistle and Martin (2005: 236) propose that partnerships “designed to bring together competencies from different sectors” are the basis for transformational approaches to service quality improvement in public services.

### **Quantitative approaches to measuring service quality**

Quantitative survey-based approaches to measuring service quality such as SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, et al. 1985) measure the gap between service users’ perceptions and expectations across a series of standardised dimensions characterising the service. Each of these dimensions (eg. in the case of

SERVQUAL: tangibles; reliability; responsiveness; assurance and empathy; Parasuraman et al., 1988) is measured using generic questions, data being collected from a statistically representative sample via a survey instrument such as a questionnaire. Although the disconfirmation approach is reported widely in the literature (for example: Brysland and Curry, 2001; Donnelly et al., 2006; Parasuraman, 1995), there has also been considerable debate with regard to the generic standardised nature of dimensions.

A number of authors (eg. Babakus and Boller, 1992; Carman, 1990; Robinson, 1999) argue that, rather than being based upon standardised dimensions, a service's quality is a function of that particular service and the industry within which it is located. Furthermore, the use of generic dimensions to measure a particular service's quality is unlikely to provide the details necessary to define specific causes of a problem rather than its symptoms (Killmann, 1986).

Standardised dimensions may therefore provide insufficient focus or detail to account for the uniqueness and realities of specific services or service relationships, and how these are expressed, assessed and interpreted by the both service users and deliverers (Rosen and Suprenant, 1998). Where these measures are used only from the perspective of service user or deliverer, any symptoms identified are unlikely to reflect fully the dyadic nature of service encounters (Svensson, 2001).

For service quality measurement to enable improvement, data collected must be useful. In this context, usefulness can be viewed from the three interrelated perspectives. As highlighted in the discussion above, in order to ensure construct validity, those used need to be able to capture perceptions of reality considered important by each party involved within the specific service (Chi Cui et al., 2003). Secondly, these constructs must incorporate sufficient detail to allow a clear understanding of the particular service situation, thereby ensuring content validity. Finally, the measurement process must enable the meanings of the data collected to be understood and explored and quality improvement agendas derived.

Data collected using quantitative measures of service quality are usually subject to interpretation by third parties, such as consultants or managers. The meanings ascribed to such data by a third party may differ from those given by service users or deliverers leading to problems of second order interpretation (Yin, 2003). For example, a manager evaluating a service may explain the finding that 75 % of users were unhappy with the responsiveness of service providers as due to the poor attitudes of the people providing the service when, in reality, this is due to there being insufficient people to deliver the service at the required standard. The manager has added her or his own interpretation to the answers offered and emphases placed by respondents, rather than these being understood and interpreted as intended (Foddy, 1994). Consequently, meanings in the data are mis-reported or, at worst, unrecognised. Furthermore, such quantitative measures rarely require respondents to indicate the relative

importance of quality constructs (Pitt et al., 1995). Rather the person undertaking the inquiry judges what is important and consequently those aspects about which data should be collected. Attention is therefore focussed on those areas that she or he believes are of critical concern (Foddy, 1994; Krueger and Casey, 2000). Consequently, service users' and deliverers' perceptions about which characteristics are key to the quality of service may not form the basis for analysis and future action.

### **A user and deliverer focussed approach – The Extended Service Template Process**

The ESTP is a process in which separate groups of service users and deliverers generate their own visual (qualitative) representations or Service Templates of a defined service. Each group records separately the characteristics of the service or service relationship they identify as important by creating their own Service Template. For each characteristic, perceptions and expectations measured against a group-defined Likert-type scale anchored by 'ideal' and 'worst' descriptors (Figure 1). Developed over the last decade, through a series of consultancy interventions, the ESTP not only measures perceptions of service quality, but also reflects the dyadic nature of service encounters and the need to promote action to improve service quality. For a full account of its development, see Williams and Saunders, (2006). The process incorporates 3 phases (Table 1).

[Ideal place for Table 1]

In phase I, *Participant Selection*, discrete purposive samples are drawn from groups of service users and service deliverers (the parties) involved in a service. Individuals are selected for each non-probability sample on the basis of their criticality to that service or service relationship, rather than to ensure statistical representativeness of those involved. Each party therefore provides their own, in-depth account of the service in question from which logical rather than statistical generalisations can be developed. Together these represent the diversity of views regarding those dimensions users and deliverers consider are key to the service.

*Service Quality Measurement and Data Validation* (Table 1, phase II), allows the independent collection of qualitative data from users and deliverers involved in the service. Separate meetings of approximately two hours duration, are organised with each party, the number of participants (six to ten) being informed by Krueger and Casey (2000) work on focus groups. Each meeting is managed by a facilitator and progresses through the four stages outlined in Table 1. In the preparation stage, the purpose and nature of the process is explained and meanings of terms clarified. The service situation being considered is displayed prominently to help maintain focus. The characteristics of this situation are then elicited and displayed in the order they emerge, by the facilitator using the group's words, through a thought shower type process (stage 2). Clarification of



meanings is sought to help ensure that participants have both a similar frame of reference and the same understanding. Subsequently, the list of characteristics is refined and ideal and worst situation descriptors (bi-polar adjectives) generated for the extremes of each characteristic (Figure 1). Perceptions and expectations of the service and variations within these are then measured and plotted for each characteristic relative to the extremes using a ten-point scale, the value ten representing the ideal and the value one, the worst case (stage 3). The resultant Service Template (Figure 1), typically including between 20 and 30 characteristics, is then discussed with participants to help confirm internal validity. Finally (stage 4) participants identify and weight those characteristics they consider most important by allocating 100 points between them.

[Ideal place for Figure 1]

In the final phase, *Improvement Agenda Development* (Table 1, phase III), service users and deliverers who have generated their Templates separately meet and explore jointly each others' views of the service and develop an improvement agenda. The meeting commences with the facilitator reminding participants of the process to date and the purpose of the meeting, namely to share, explore, learn and identify possible actions (Phase III, stage 1). The Service Templates created in phase II are used as visual catalysts for these users and deliverers to explore and learn about each other's perceptions and expectations (Phase III, stage 2). Service users and deliverers are facilitated to share their Templates, prior to them establishing and understanding jointly

which characteristics are important for the service's quality and explaining why by offering rich in-depth accounts. The composition of facilitated groups and the content of their discussions are determined by the service users and deliverers to help maintain their ownership of the process. Finally, they are asked to reflect on the meeting and focus upon actions needed to improve service quality (phase III, stage 3). To help provide structure, feedback from participants is sought by the facilitator adopting the role of confrontive enquirer (Schein, 1999). Through this participants identify and own an agenda to improve service quality.

The ESTP addresses several of the shortcomings of quantitative approaches to measuring service quality. The constructs (characteristics) against which service quality is measured are neither generic nor pre-specified. Rather, as part of the process, users and deliverers involved in the service determine separately those characteristics they consider important, resulting in Service Templates that reflect their specific language, terminology, detail and priorities. Furthermore, organisational development research (for example, Schein, 1999) has highlighted the importance of problem ownership for those developing appropriate solutions. Phase III of the ESTP helps encourage ownership of the process and its outcomes by the participants, enabling service users and deliverers to understand and where necessary, reconcile their own and others' views, prior to jointly generating a service quality improvement agenda.

Following a description of the research method, the remainder of the chapter evaluates the ESTP, paying attention to both measurement and the utility of the process in enabling the development of a service quality improvement agenda.

### **Evaluation of the ESTP: method**

Evaluation of the ESTP focuses upon two interrelated aspects: provision of rich in-depth accounts of service quality and the process's utility to develop an improvement agenda. Data were therefore collected in three distinct UK public service situations during and after the application of the ESTP. These were the provision by reception staff and their manager of a reception service to internal users on the main site of a large multi-site public sector organisation; the delivery by supervisors of dissertation supervision to final year undergraduate students at a new university business school; and the provision by the Housing Corporation managers of funding to Registered Social Landlord (Housing Association) development managers to develop social housing to meet needs identified by Local Authorities' development managers. For each case, data were collected during and after the application of the ESTP from the purposive samples of service users and deliverers involved in the process (Table 2).

[Ideal place for Table 2]

Data collection incorporated a combination of research diaries, participant observation, follow-up interviews and written feedback from participants.

Consent was obtained in each of the three cases to use data for research purposes and ESTP evaluation. For each of the cases, one researcher acted as facilitator and the other as observer. The former recorded secondary observations in a research diary and the latter noted primary observations such as participant's interactions, comments and the extent to which they appeared involved, as well as any amendments to the process. At each meeting, participants were introduced to the facilitator and observer and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Data were collected during the three phases of the ESTP (Table 1).

Semi-structured group interviews of approximately 30 minutes duration were planned by the observer to capture participants' perceptions of the process and its utility following the completion of Phase III. This was possible for 8 of the 10 reception service participants, all 14 of those considering dissertation supervision and 17 of the 21 involved in the provision of funding for social housing. Data were also collected approximately 6 months after the completion of the ESTP on its impact within each case study organisation. This was obtained by telephone interview with the senior manager involved and triangulated with additional data collected from at least two of the participants in the ESTP.

These data were used to evaluate the process's ability to elucidate rich in-depth accounts and its utility for improvement agenda development. Initially the data collected were analysed and triangulated by ourselves independently, using the

three phases of the ESTP as a framework. Where interpretation of these data varied, this was discussed further prior to agreeing a conclusion. By this process, problems of reliability associated with single person interpretation were minimised (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

## **Findings**

### ***Participant selection***

Like any sample based research, the utility of findings is dependent upon the sample from which data are collected. Within quantitative service quality studies, such as those using SERVQUAL, ensuring that the sample is representative and the results statistically significant enhances this. For qualitative studies, such as those using the ESTP, the utility of findings is dependant upon the characteristics of the sample of participants selected to generate the Service Templates, their subsequent commitment to the process and the richness of the data they provide. Time spent on careful selection of separate purposive samples of service users and deliverers, using clear service-specific criteria is therefore essential. In particular there is a need to ensure the individuals selected are both critical to, and can between them, account for and explain the extent and diversity (Patton, 2002) of the service in question. Working with each of the three cases revealed that, to ensure the collection of useful data, sample size within each group would vary.

In examining the provision of funding for social housing for example, the sample of Housing Corporation managers needed to capture the discrete aspects of the service provision for which each was responsible. Six managers who interacted directly with local authorities and registered social landlords were therefore selected. As each manager was responsible for a different aspect of work and was at a different level in the hierarchy, individual meetings were held to generate separate Service Templates. In contrast each Registered Social Landlord's development officer was undertaking a similar role and so a joint Service Template was developed. For the dissertation supervision case, discussion with the module leader emphasised a need to focus upon overall quality of dissertation supervision. Consequently, the purposive sample of service users consisted of eight students taking a level III dissertation who represented all degree combinations within that business school, whilst the six supervisors (service deliverers) encompassed the full breadth of supervisory and subject experience (table 2).

### ***Service Quality Measurement and Data Validation***

Subsequent accounts of service quality and data validation emphasised the importance of the preparation stage [Table 1: Phase II, stage 1]. In all but the reception service case, between 10 and 15 minutes were devoted to explaining the nature and operation of ESTP in relation to a neutral example of a familiar service encounter, a supermarket checkout. Observer notes confirmed that this

resulted in fewer questions of clarification and justification during the creation of the Service Templates for these cases. Despite this, observer notes highlight that, in all cases, participants often appeared sceptical at the start of the ESTP, needing to experience and understand the process as applied to their service situation before committing themselves.

[Ideal place for Figure 2]

In exploring a service's characteristics, and the 'ideal' and 'worst' descriptors, the facilitator sought clarity of meaning from the participants. This often resulted in discussion and revision of a single adjective to a short descriptive phrase, thought by the participants to capture their meaning. For example the 'ideal' descriptor for 'Priorities' (Figure 1) is 'concise, clear and consistent'.

Participants also tended initially to offer single adjectives, the 'ideal' being expressed as the opposite of the 'worst'. For example, the worst descriptor for 'Priorities' (Figure 1) was originally 'inconsistent', participants commenting: "inconsistent is just the opposite, it doesn't tell you any more....how about muddled?" Observer notes indicate that participants' confidence in generating their own descriptors grew as the process progressed, meanings often being clarified unprompted.

For all cases, participants understood and liked the visual representation of service quality in their Service Templates and the interactive process of plotting

perceptions and expectations against their identified characteristics (for example, Figure 2). They also liked the flexibility within the process and the fact it allowed multiple perspectives, a typical comment being 'it allowed us to say what we thought was important'. Observer notes highlighted that, within each group, participants used Phase II to discuss, explain and justify their perceptions to each other. They appeared surprised but pleased that the process was sufficiently flexible to measure and record within-group differences, this being typified by one respondent who declared he was "interested that others may mention something we've never considered". Through this process all gained an understanding of their group's perceptions and expectations across their agreed characteristics.

The final stage of Phase II allows each group to weight the characteristics, thereby highlighting those considered most important. All approached this by allocating 100 points, the most common approaches to allocating points being group discussion or calculating the mean of group members' individual points allocations. Observer notes and research diary comments highlighted the difficulty participants experienced in agreeing and prioritising important characteristics. However, the resulting discussions helped each group further validate their group understanding of service quality, minor changes being made where requested.

The time taken to generate each of the Service Templates varied considerably, those involving more participants taking longer. Generation of the 17 Service



Templates created to examine the provision of funding to develop social housing took from 60 minutes for a single Housing Corporation Manager to 270 minutes for the Registered Social Landlords' Development Managers' template (Figure 1). For some participants, particularly those in more senior roles, this created problems, where they had only allowed the two hours requested. Immediately after a meeting, each Service Templates was word-processed. Participants were given a choice regarding the order characteristics were presented, but always requested they were presented in weighted order, emphasising those that they considered most important.

### ***Improvement Agenda Development***

In all three of the cases there were difficulties in finding a time when all those involved in generating the associated Service Templates were available, highlighting the need for careful pre-planning of meetings to ensure participants can attend. Consequently meetings were held up to two months after these Templates had been generated and, other than for dissertation supervision, did not include all participants. Although, appearing to have little impact on the interpretation of the Service Templates, the time delay between phases II and III meant participants welcomed the opportunity to refamiliarise themselves with their Service Templates prior to discussion.

Following assurances of individual confidentiality, Service Templates were explored jointly. Comments made by participants suggest this enabled them to

develop a shared understanding of the range of views. Discussion was introduced by short presentations from each group explaining their Templates, focusing on their high-weighted characteristics. Each participant received copies of all Service Templates and sought clarification as necessary. Subsequently, for the reception service and dissertation supervision cases participants chose to discuss and explore the Templates collectively. Within this they focussed on the major differences and similarities of the high weighted characteristics and the gaps between perceptions and expectations, rather than precise values suggested by the numbers on the ten-point scale (Saunders and Williams, 2005). In the case of the provision of funding to develop social housing, participants' interrogation of the Templates generated by other groups was structured into four discussion rounds due to the larger number of Templates and the involvement of service deliverers and users from three organisations. For each of the first three rounds participant groups agreed which other group they wished to have a 45-minute discussion with over their respective Templates. For the final round participants requested that representatives from all three groups meet together to explore their Templates. Observer notes commenting on the design of this session suggested that tri-partite presentations and discussions would probably have been more useful.

Observer notes emphasise that, within all three cases, there were many commonalities amongst the views expressed by the parties to the services in question regarding the characteristics determining service quality. For example, in the provision of funding to develop social housing there was commonality

between those characteristics ranked highly by Housing Corporation managers and the Registered Social Landlord development managers. This reflected their concerns for timing of the bidding process. In a Housing Corporation manager's Service Template, this characteristic was referred to as 'Process Timing' (Figure 2), whilst in the Registered Social Landlord development managers' Template it was referred to as 'Timetable, bidding/timing' (Figure 1). Discussion highlighted that Housing Corporation managers were concerned with ensuring equity in the processes of bidding for and allocation of funds. In contrast, the development managers' focus was upon ensuring that the bidding process took up a little time as possible, thereby maximising the time available for developing housing schemes. This was captured in their Template by their extremes of 'concise' and 'protracted' (Figure 1). The views regarding the mismatch between perceived performance and expectations for both this and other Housing Corporation managers and the Registered Social Landlord development managers highlighted that improvement could be achieved in this area. One outcome of their joint exploration of the Service Templates was the challenging of Housing Corporation managers' assumptions about what the Registered Social Landlord development managers perceived to be important. Even where terms with apparently similar meaning are used within individual Templates, observer notes highlight that the exploration of these terms means service users and deliverers can be confronted with hitherto unrecognised differing perspectives of the service relationship. Conversely, as in the reception service case, joint exploration of respective Templates can result in users and

deliverers commenting that, despite differences in language, 'all groups had raised the same issues'.

Participants in the three cases confirmed that, although time consuming, joint exploration of the Service Templates was worthwhile, providing an opportunity for dialogue leading to jointly agreed service quality improvement agendas. The descriptors of each characteristic provided an additional level of detail to inform this process. For example, in the process of funding social housing, the practicalities of delivering 'Programme(s)' of housing schemes within the 'annual' timescale imposed considerable pressure on the development managers, (Figure 1). Their preference for a longer planning horizon in this relationship was emphasised by the 'ideal' descriptor 'rolling, three year' for this characteristic, their expectations at the positive end of the scale and the large gap between these and their perceptions. The narrow range of perceptions recorded for this characteristic indicated a high degree of consensus relative to their expectations. Joint exploration of this issue led to proposals of how the concerns could be addressed. Participants commented that discussion allowed them to explain those aspects of the service where expectations were not met in sufficient detail to enable the associated problems to be defined clearly and for them to suggest possible improvements. In the dissertation supervision case, students commented they had enjoyed working with supervisors to develop quality improvement proposals. They said they found the process 'engaging' and that, unlike more traditional methods of evaluation they had experienced, felt their 'contributions were really valued'. Furthermore, the

process facilitated the participants taking ownership of the process and its outcomes. Observer comments made during all three cases highlighted how participants took ownership of the process and appeared to enjoy participating.

These meetings required careful facilitation to help focus dialogue on both learning and possible improvements, as well as to allow sufficient time for meaningful discussion and reflection. The time required for each of the three meetings varied from a time-limited meeting of 120 minutes for dissertation supervision, 155 minutes for the reception service and 300 minutes for the funding process, again reflecting the complexity of the service being considered.

The ESTP's utility in enabling service quality improvement agendas to emerge can be considered in relation to the use made of the data generated. For each of the three cases, participant groups drew up jointly a list of outcomes and suggestions for taking the project forward. In the case of the provision of funding to develop social housing, the importance of a partnership approach to the parties from the three bodies involved in the provision of social housing in the UK was reinforced, as was the need to develop further the method by which funding could be provided over longer time periods (Williams et al., 1999). For the reception service, there was consensus over a perceived conflict arising from the requirements for the receptionists to provide face-to-face service while operating the organisation's main switchboard. One resulting outcome was the relocation of the main switchboard away from the reception area (Williams and

Saunders, 2006). The receptionists commented that they wished to continue to be involved in further improvements. For dissertation supervision, consistency of the supervisory process and assessment criteria and the timing of the research methods workshops, were the main issues arising from phase III of the ESTP (Saunders and Williams, 2005). As a result, consistency of advice was the subject of a staff development session where lecturers reconsidered the nature of the dissertation and assessment criteria. Additionally the research methods the workshops were rescheduled to reflect more closely the stage students should have reached in their dissertations.

## **DISCUSSION**

Using clearly defined purposive samples of parties involved in a service, the ESTP has been shown to enable the characteristics that those service users and deliverers who are critical to the service believe are important to the quality of that service to be established and defined separately. Perceptions and expectations of performance are measured and recorded in a visual format using participant-defined and described descriptors. The resulting Service Templates provide a context for enabling joint understanding, problem definition and the development of an agenda for action.

The final phase of the ESTP enables these Service Templates to be compared and discussed by participants in the process, as they re-examine those characteristics they believe are important to that service's quality in conjunction

with the characteristics highlighted by the other parties. Participant generated characteristics and descriptors afford a high level of service specific detail as a context for this discussion. Visual representation in the form of Service Templates appears to assist participants' understanding of their own and other group's views in this process.

Discussion throughout the process means each party tests and defends the values and norms on which those characteristics they believe to be important are based. Despite an apparent lack of commonality in the language used to define a service, there were often elements of common ground regarding those characteristics that were important. Where this was not so, the Service Templates emphasised that the users and deliverers measured the service's quality within differing sets of norms. The ESTP therefore enables participants selected because they are critical to service delivery and usage to reflect in depth upon the norms underlying their own assessments of service quality and their appropriateness in relation to other service participants. By highlighting differences and similarities in the norms and values upon which such assessments are based, new understandings, specific to the service in question can be developed by participants. The discursive and participative nature of phase III of the ESTP is instrumental in promoting shared understanding and ownership in the context of the specific service.

The research reported in this chapter highlights the importance of the facilitator in managing the process, helping the derivation, exploration and subsequent

dialogue between service users and deliverers about Service Templates and the agreement of agendas for action. Fundamental to the process when measuring service quality is the separate generation of discrete Service Templates for service users and deliverers [Phase II]. Through these the facilitator ensures that key dimensions from both service user and deliverer perspectives are surfaced separately measured and recorded in Service Templates. However, prior to use of the ESTP, a clear understanding and commitment by users and deliverers to both the process and the time required of individuals has been shown to be essential. This understanding incorporates the process of participant selection where the need to ensure the collection of useful data requires careful purposive selection and may necessitate deviation from the sample size range suggested

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, the ESTP appears able to reflect the reality of dyadic interchange between users and deliverers involved in any public service and offers an additional, qualitatively based tool to the range of existing quality assessment processes. The ESTP is an alternative approach to measuring perceptions and expectations of service quality in a systematic manner. Because predetermined scales are not used, it is likely to be applicable without modification to evaluating quality across a range of public service encounters and relationships. Although time consuming, users and deliverers are able to question and



evaluate the appropriateness of the characteristics they believe are important within a service and achieve consistency of understanding. This can be a basis for empowering the parties to a service and promoting collaboration between them. Integral to this process is the need for discussion, learning and problem definition, deriving an agenda for improvement and developing ownership of agreed solutions.

Within qualitative research such as the ESTP, reliability in terms of the extent to which the account of service quality could be replicated by another enquirer, is dependent upon the extent to which the procedures through which the data have been generated and interpreted are followed and documented carefully (Silverman, 2006). In particular the involvement of clearly defined purposive samples of service users and deliverers, recording of their perceptions and expectations as service templates and subsequent testing of assumptions as the Templates are explored is critical to maintaining reliability.

The cases outlined suggest the ESTP offers an alternative to measuring of service quality and can assist in improvement agenda development within the arena of public service operations. As such, it is one response to Brysland and Curry's (2001, p.393) call for 'a ready tool for evaluating and prioritising changes in current service quality, for public sector managers.

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## Figures and tables

Table 1. The Extended Service Template Process

Phase	Stage	Description
<b>I</b>		<b>Participant selection</b>
<b>II</b>		<b>Service quality measurement and data validation (for each group)</b>
	1	Preparation
	2	Explore service characteristics
	3	Plot perceptions and expectations against identified characteristics on Service Template
	4	Interpret and validate issues
<b>III</b>		<b>Improvement agenda development</b>
	1	Brief participants, surface concerns and refamiliarise
	2	Explore and learn
	3	Generate agenda for improvement

Table 2. Sample organisations

Organisation(s)	Service quality issue	Purposive samples
Large, multi-site public service	<b>Main reception:</b> improvement to main reception service on the organisation's main site	<b>Service users:</b> 6 internal staff representing key users of reception services <b>Service deliverers:</b> 3 reception staff; 1 departmental manager
New university business school	<b>Dissertation supervision:</b> improvement to undergraduate business management dissertation supervision	<b>Service users:</b> 8 level III undergraduates <b>Service deliverers:</b> 6 dissertation supervisors
Housing Corporation, Local Authorities, Registered Social Landlords	<b>Provision of funding to develop social housing</b> improvement in the service relationship between the Housing Corporation, Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords	<b>Service Users:</b> 8 Registered Social Landlord development managers <b>Service deliverers:</b> 6 Housing Corporation managers; 7 Local Authorities' enabling officers

**Figure 1. Annotated extract from Service Template reflecting Registered Social Landlords development managers' views of the provision of funding to develop social housing**

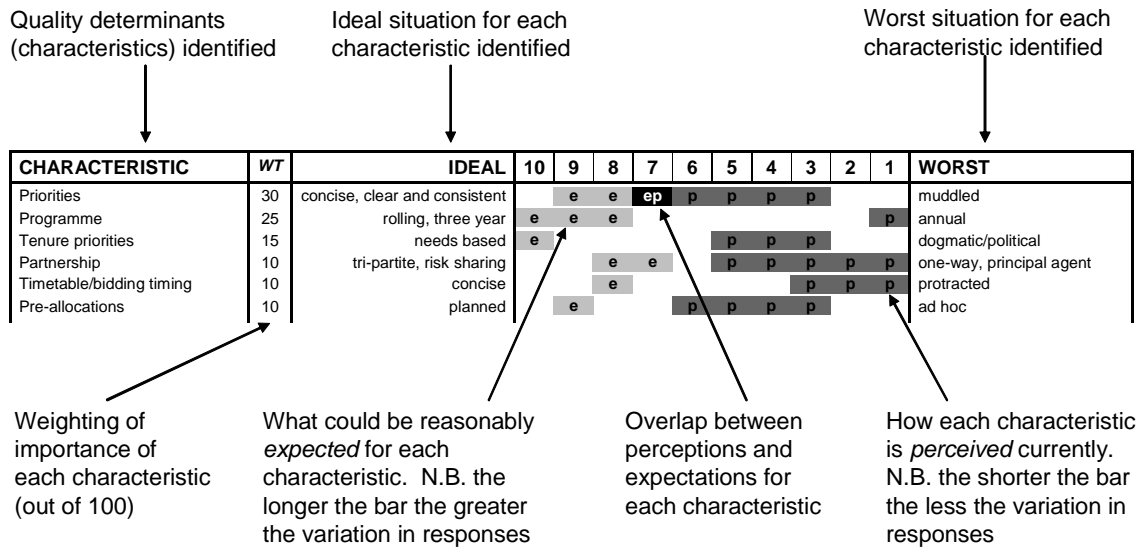


Figure 2. Extract from Service Template reflecting a Housing Corporation manager's view of the provision of funding to develop social housing

CHARACTERISTIC	WT	IDEAL	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	WORST
Process timing	40	fair/formal	e		p								restrictive
Documentation –policy document	30	clear, detailed		e	p								too long
Publication of results -content Bidding document	30	full explanation/justification comprehensive, helpful to Registered Social Landlords' case			ep		p						no explanation/justification complex
Publication of results -time scale		generous	e	p									limited

Key: expectations e overlap ep perceptions p

## BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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