



**Institute for
Citizen-Centred
Service**

**L'Institut des
services axés
sur les citoyens**

Municipalities and Citizen-Centred Service

**Report to the Public Sector Service Delivery Council
December 4, 2001**

Prepared by Nicholas Prychodko
ICCS Program Director

Background

It is the intention of this report to set out a broad overview of citizen-centred service delivery issues faced by municipalities to act as a springboard for further deliberation on the opportunities for more fully engaging with municipalities both within the PSSDC and particularly through the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service.

The report is based on a review of eleven large and mid-sized municipalities across Canada. The municipalities examined were Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Oakville, Burlington, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver and Victoria. It is worth noting that smaller municipalities and their potentially unique needs and experience are, therefore, not represented in the findings. The methodology employed included a review of selected published material, a scan of municipal web sites and a number of interviews conducted both by telephone and in person. This methodology was neither rigorous nor comprehensive in character and its conclusions, therefore, should not be considered as definitive.

Introduction

It should come as no surprise that municipalities, while reflecting varying emphases and levels of development, are involved in the same types of citizen-centred service initiatives and face the same challenges as other orders of government. It is worth noting some key characteristics at the outset, however, which provide a context to better appreciate municipal service initiatives.

In pursuing citizen-centred service initiatives, municipalities have been driven by the economic imperative of “doing more with less”. While all governments have been subject to this pressure, municipalities, more so than other orders of government, have seen their proportional share of total tax revenues decline over the past decade. This has been intensified and accelerated, in some cases, by the devolution of services by provinces that have, in some jurisdictions, also legislated municipal amalgamations.

This fiscal impetus has resulted in a general review and reform of service provision at the municipal level. This reform process has followed the familiar cycle of identifying core

services; paring those services not deemed as being core; followed by a search for alternative service delivery approaches where feasible; and the redesign of those remaining directly- provided services. It is in the context of this broader reform process that citizen-centred service delivery approaches have been pursued.

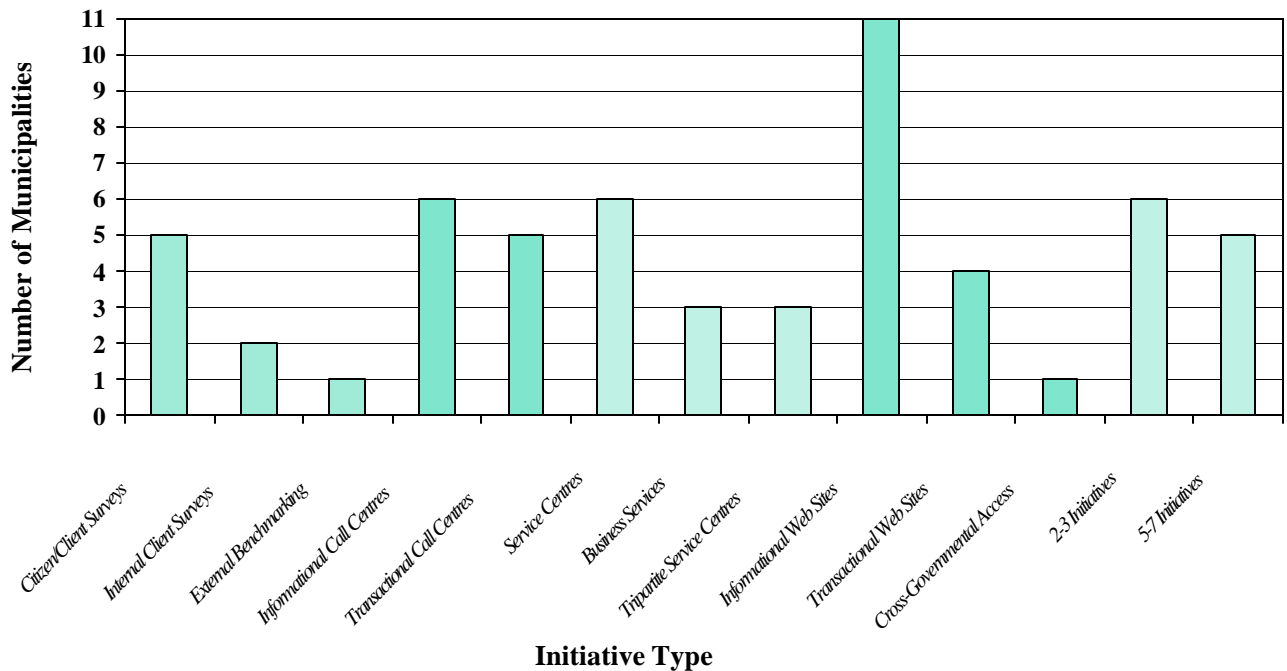
In some cases, municipalities have embarked upon citizen-centred service initiatives in an ad hoc fashion, instituting service initiatives intended to enhance specific aspects of service delivery such as telephone access. In other instances, they have been undertaken as part of a systematic and comprehensive approach to redesigning service delivery through continuous improvement quality management approaches.

A final point worth noting is that, of the three orders of government, municipalities are the most closely tied to the daily service needs of citizens and experience the most frequent per capita level of service contact. This reality generates heightened demands and pressures along with a potential for certain opportunities and economies of scale.

Municipal Citizen-Centred Service Initiatives and Associated Challenges

The table below summarizes the findings of the review according to the number of municipalities engaged in specific types of citizen-centred service initiatives. The subsections that follow the table expand briefly on the findings related to each type of initiative.

Municipal Citizen-Centred Service Initiatives



Citizen/Client Surveying

Five of the eleven municipalities reviewed are engaged in, or are planning, some form of citizen/client surveying related to the identification of service priorities and satisfaction levels with service delivery. Two out of the eleven are engaged in surveying satisfaction levels of internal clients and stakeholders. Three were participants in Citizens First 2000. In all, seven out of the eleven municipalities surveyed have been engaged in some form of citizen/client satisfaction surveying.

A number of these survey initiatives are being conducted yearly to facilitate the identification of service priorities for annual business planning purposes. This annual surveying also creates the opportunity to internally benchmark service satisfaction levels and track service performance over time. In at least two municipalities, this capacity has played a key role as part of continuous improvement, quality management and balanced score card initiatives in which citizen satisfaction is a component. In one case, a municipality has sought to benchmark its own performance against others, availing itself of the services of the U.S.-

based International City/County Management Association in the absence of any Canadian-based benchmarking regime.

In two instances municipalities are aware of and have been influenced by the existence of the Common Measurements Tool in developing their own surveys. In one instance, there was an unsuccessful attempt to use the eCMT while in another, a licensing agreement has been reached and plans are moving forward to apply it. Overall, while reflecting some significant overlaps, there is a diversity of citizen/client satisfaction tools in use by municipalities with identified drivers ranging from three, to five, to ten in number. This diversity creates an obvious impediment to benchmarking between jurisdictions.

There have been a number of other challenges experienced by municipalities developing and applying citizen/client satisfaction surveys. The absence, in most cases, of an established and accepted survey tool has meant that municipalities have had to devote time and resources to developing one. In doing so they have been further hampered by the lack of expertise in survey design, administration and analysis. In some cases, external consultants have been hired to perform these tasks.

The development of appropriate instruments and methodologies has been further complicated by the need to win political support and to overcome divergent organizational interests and silos between administrative units involved in the effort. While useful in forging a shared vision and building organizational momentum, the resolution of competing needs and interests has required considerable time and effort whenever this process has been undertaken.

Telephone Call Centres

Six of the eleven municipalities reviewed have instituted or are in the process of developing telephone call centres. In each case, it is larger municipalities with significant service request volumes who have embarked on these initiatives. In one case, telephone call centres are independent products of two individual departments, but generally speaking they have been approached as opportunities to provide one-window information and/or service delivery vehicles for the municipality as a whole. Having said this, the range of approaches to this service initiative reflects virtually as many variations as the number of municipalities promoting it.

In one instance, the call centre is a purely informational line to assist clients in understanding and accessing municipal services. In the balance of cases, however, they also provide transactional services such as the ability to pay parking fines, or to register for recreation programs, or to request boulevard maintenance. The range of transactional services offered varies considerably, with the scope of service options generally being expanded within jurisdictions with the passage of time and accumulation of experience. Hours of operation vary significantly. In some cases transactional services are provided during regular business hours (Monday to Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.), in others they operate on extended hours (Monday through Sunday 7:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.) and in one instance they operate 7 days per week, 24 hours per day. Informational services follow the same pattern, in some cases with automated systems in place outside regular business hours.

In some of the municipalities, the institution of call centres has been accompanied by the development of customer service standards. The time taken to answer incoming calls and acceptable “abandonment” rates of client calls are examples of identified service benchmarks.

Municipalities have faced a number of challenges in putting call centres in place. The development of single-window call centres has been predicated on the ability to integrate and represent information concerning services and transacting service delivery across departments within a municipal jurisdiction. This has meant breaking down the silos or “stovepipes” between administrative divisions, an undertaking whose litany of pitfalls and frustrations is familiar to most. This task has been further complicated in those instances where regional municipal amalgamations have taken place necessitating the integration of multiple departments in one business line.

In virtually all cases, the creation of call centres has also necessitated the development of integrated information technology systems to provide call centre representatives with access to information and transactional tools. This is both time-consuming and costly in an environment where resources are scarce. Staff training in the use of these systems applications and in customer service approaches and standards has also been required.

Over-the-Counter Service Centres

All four municipalities who have instituted cross-departmental telephone call centres have also initiated, or are developing, some form of integrated service delivery centres. These

service centres are, in contrast to the previous practice of each department having its own service counter(s), integrated across service departments and offer single-window access to the full range of municipal services over one counter.

In a dramatic shift away from all or most services being located at city halls, these service centres operate through de-centralized community-based storefront offices. In the case of a fifth municipality that has undergone amalgamation, single-counter services are planned on the ground floors of the former city halls that now provide community-based services. In at least three of the five jurisdictions, specific services exist, and in one other case are being developed, to meet the particular needs of the business community. In two of the three instances, this involves access to databases related to such matters as property valuations and tax assessments. In the third instance, differing levels of service are offered at service centres, with three out of a total of six service centres offering enhanced access to development, planning and engineering department services.

As more exceptional examples, another three of the municipalities reviewed have also become involved in the development of common and/or integrated tripartite service counters with the provincial and federal levels of government. In one instance, the three levels of government have co-located their services to unemployed citizens at a shared service centre. While budgets, HR structures, IT systems, records management and most program delivery areas are operated independently by the three levels, service is provided to clients over a single counter. In the two other instances, the three orders of government have collaborated to establish a service centre to support entrepreneurs and small business owners. In this case, the services of the three government jurisdictions have been integrated into a single and seamless service window with no visible distinction between the three levels of government and their respective services.

Municipalities initiating single-window service centres have faced the same problems associated with the establishment of call centres outlined above. These include the breaking down of departmental silos, the integration of service information into common databases, development of integrated IT systems and the training of service counter staff. The development of common or integrated service counters with other levels of government has posed a range of additional significant challenges. Physical co-location has meant that either one jurisdiction has had to be able and willing to provide and share a venue with its partners, or that, alternatively, they have been able to agree together on the terms for commonly securing, funding and managing one. In each case, the integration or

coexistence of office standards, covering staff security, client access and privacy policies have had to be achieved. The cross-training of staff in representing and delivering partners' services, where integration has been the case, has been required. These and other issues have been further complicated by the need to take account of and co-ordinate varying HR protocols and collective agreements. Similarly, decision-making authority, accountability structures and administrative approaches have required co-ordination, if not integration. Budgeting protocols have had to be co-ordinated and fiscal responsibilities have required negotiation. Not least, the issue of visual identity has also had to be addressed in both common and integrated service contexts. All of these issues along with any others, finally, have had to be captured in negotiated legal agreements.

On-Line Service Access

All eleven of the municipalities reviewed have entered the electronic information age and boast web sites which provide information on municipal services and contact numbers to access such services. Of these, four have also launched electronic service delivery, offering service transactions over the internet, while at least two others are in the process of doing so. Typically, these allow clients to submit bill payments such as parking fines and water bills, to register for recreation programs or to book facilities such as arenas, and to submit license applications and fees such as dog licenses. In four instances, electronic access to land registration and property tax information is available or being developed specifically for use by the business community.

Access to municipal electronic service transactions is being achieved primarily through clients' own personal computers. In at least one instance, however, access is being further facilitated through the placement of public access on-line terminals at service centres, while in another instance the deployment of electronic on-line kiosks in public places is being contemplated.

In one instance, there has been an effort to facilitate single-window access to public services across the three levels of government through the inclusion of a search engine facilitating links to provincial and federal government service sites. The possibility of harnessing municipal web sites as the single-window segue into government services at all levels, has been pursued by Industry Canada through its project to develop a Canadian Municipal Information Service.

Municipalities are facing a number of common challenges in developing their on-line service initiatives. Electronic access to information, whether directly by the client or by service representatives, as in the case of call centres and service centres above, requires the development of appropriate databases and retrieval systems. Interactive electronic transactions require further IT enhancements and administrative systems. These, again, are both time-consuming and costly to develop. Electronic financial transactions also carry an economic penalty since credit card transactions entail a 3% service charge for municipalities. Finally, while not as complex as developing integrated single-window over-the-counter services between the three orders of government, the emergence of common access to on-line services through municipal web sites, poses challenges related to infrastructure development and the elaboration of approaches and standards for the integration and navigation of web sites.

Summary

All of the municipalities reviewed are involved in citizen-centred service initiatives in a substantial fashion. As illustrated in the table at the head of the previous section, each municipality is involved in at least two or three of the eleven initiative types identified in the review and some are involved in as many as seven. In the latter case, these tend to be the larger municipalities who have both greater client demand as well as more substantial resources which they can leverage.

Based on the findings of the review, municipal citizen-centred service initiatives can be characterized as seeking, in varying degrees, to:

- Identify and quantify citizen/client and internal client perceptions of service quality and its drivers through the application of surveying and benchmarking tools;
- Create comprehensive and integrated databases and information management systems across departments and business lines to facilitate single-window service provision;
- Extend the integration of service jurisdictions, as opportunities present themselves, across the three orders of government;
- Recognize and address the specific service needs of businesses; and
- Bring service access closer to clients through such vehicles as centralized call centres, decentralized service centres and on-line services.

