

## Directive no. 4-1

### STANDARDS FOR SERVICE OF EXCELLENCE OFFERED BY THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION TO THE PUBLIC AND TO PUBLIC EMPLOYEES

Issued on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017 by the Principal Permanent Secretary in terms of the Public Administration Act.

#### 1. APPLICABILITY

1.1. This directive repeals and re-issues with amendments the one originally issued on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2010. It applies to all Ministries, departments, agencies and entities falling under the Public Administration Act, and to Public Sector Entities/Organisations (hereinafter referred to as “government organisations”) and to all their employees.

1.2. The foundations of the Public Administration’s **Quality Service** are aligned to four pillars namely, **listening** and understanding the customer; **design** and implementation of policies that meet the customer expectations; **delivery** of a quality service by providing timely, high standard and easily accessible services; and, **accountability** where the people become part of the Excellence of the Service provided.

1.3. The standards required for service delivery are being reviewed with the aim to ensure that the services are delivered professionally and in conformity with the quality standards required, as indicated in section 1.2 above.

1.4. Unless otherwise defined, the provisions of this Directive shall come into force on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

#### 2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. Following on recent People Management policy developments, namely, a simplified version of the PSMC, the revision and simplification of the PSC Disciplinary Regulations, as well as the revision of Directive 8, Directive 4 is being reviewed in order to reflect these changes. The newly established P&SD at OPM, aims to ensure the continuous improvement in the quality of services provided by the Public Administration to its external client as well as to its internal client. In this regard, this Directive is complementary to the provisions set out in Directive 8-1 - ‘Decision-Making Standards Related to HR Entitlements and Services offered by the Public Service to its Employees.’

2.2. The primary aim of this directive is to address the delivery of the service by ensuring that the internal and external clients of the Public Administration have easy access to the services offered by the Public Administration whilst ensuring that such services are of a high standard and delivered on time. This directive also strives to address accountability, which is a fundamental concept based on honesty and integrity which ensures loyalty towards customers.

2.3. The general public, that is, the external client, as well as the public employees, that is the internal clients of the Public Administration have a right to expect that their requests for information, guidance and services offered by the Public Administration, are addressed with efficiency, fairness, impartiality, and integrity. To this end, and in order to maintain public confidence and trust, this Directive establishes quality standards on professional behaviour thereby

consolidating the professional and ethical principles emanating from the Code of Ethics which is annexed to the Public Administration Act.

2.4. This Directive aims to instil the importance of sustaining a high level of commitment to quality standards in the delivery of services by the Public Administration to the general public and to its employees. Hence, this Directive outlines the general quality standards by which public employees shall be guided in order to ensure the delivery of a consolidated quality service to their internal and external clients. In this regard, this Directive demarcates the timeframes within which information, guidance and decisions on queries made by external/internal clients on services offered by the Public Administration shall be provided.

2.5. The quality service standards set out by this Directive apply to:

- (a) Communication in writing - whether internal or external, including traditional as well as electronic mail;
- (b) Telephone communications;
- (c) Communication on social media;
- (d) Maintaining appointments and managing queues and reception areas;
- (e) Providing information and addressing complaints;
- (f) Services delivered online.

However, the service standards of specific technical services, such as those offered by the health and finance sectors, are not affected by this Directive, and shall continue to apply.

### **3. IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **3.1. Communication in writing**

##### **(a) General Provisions Governing Communication**

3.1.1. All incoming correspondence, whether through traditional or electronic mail, shall be acknowledged and a final reply provided thereto within the timeframes stipulated in sections 3(b) and 3(c) below.

3.1.2. Public employees shall be courteous in their communication with the general public and internal clients. This includes the correct use of titles when addressing clients (e.g. Prof., Dr., Mr., Ms., etc). As a general rule, all correspondence in writing shall commence by addressing the recipient, hence correspondence commencing immediately with a reply to the query made, and/or are answered in an abrupt manner, must be avoided.

3.1.3. All outgoing correspondence should clearly identify the officer submitting it. In this regard, the full name, designation, employing department and contact details (i.e. the official e-mail address and the office phone number) should be clearly indicated in the officer's signature. This does not apply to automated replies.

3.1.4. All outgoing e-mail correspondence should contain the standard official signature regulated by MITA.

3.1.5. All outgoing correspondence delivered by traditional post shall be made on the department's official letterhead, and signed accompanied with the full name and surname of the officer sending

the correspondence, even in cases where the officer is replying on behalf of his/her superior. It is being clarified that correspondence with a signature on its own without the signatory's full name is not acceptable.

3.1.6. Correspondence shall be in the language preferred by the client, hence correspondence received in English shall be replied to using the English language and correspondence received in Maltese shall be replied to using the Maltese language. In all cases correct grammatical use shall be made and the correct use of Maltese alphabet (such as ċ, ġ, ġħ, ħ and ż) shall be observed.

#### **(b) Communication by Electronic Mail**

3.1.7. Each incoming request for information or guidance received through e-mail is to be checked and acknowledged within **twenty-four (24) hours** from the time they are received. Whenever a request that is received is not complete, the client shall be duly informed of the required missing data/documentation, within twenty-four (24) hours from the time of the receipt of the request.

3.1.8. Incoming requests/queries which can be addressed by the receiving organisation, and decisions thereof do not require further internal/external consultation, shall be replied within **twenty-four (24) hours** from their receipt.

3.1.9. Incoming requests/queries which are of a complex nature and/or require consultation with internal/external stakeholders and therefore cannot be replied to within the timeframes stipulated in 3.1.7 and 3.1.8 above, shall still be acknowledged as indicated in 3.1.7 and 3.1.8 above.

The acknowledgement shall also include a short note indicating the expected timeframe by when a definite reply shall be given.

A final reply shall be provided as follows:

- By not later than **three (3) working days** from the date of the receipt of the query;
- This timeframe may be extended to **five (5) working days**, for reasonably justified reasons;
- This timeframe may be extended up to ten (10) working days for reasonably justified reasons.

In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary, may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case, for instance in the case of issues regarding due diligence, legal aspects etc.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that his/her request is being processed and that owing to the nature of the case, more time is required for a final decision to be taken. An indication of the expected time by when the client should receive a reply should also be provided.

3.1.10. In cases where requests/queries cannot be answered by the receiving organisation, the latter shall send an acknowledgement to the client within **twenty-four (24) hours** from the receipt of the request/query informing him/her that the query shall be forwarded to the relevant organisation which can address the request/query. The name of the organisation to which the query shall be forwarded should be indicated in the notification sent to the client. Moreover, the client shall be provided with the name and contact number of the officer to whom the query is forwarded. The organisation receiving the forwarded query shall abide by the timeframes stipulated in sections 3.1.7 – 3.1.9 above.

3.1.11. The provisions outlined under 3.1.1 – 3.1.10 above apply also to requests/queries received through generic e-mail accounts.

3.1.12. Automatic out-of-office replies should invariably be used when an officer is absent from the office for a period of one or more working days. In the out-of-office replies officers should indicate the name and contact details of the officer who can be contacted in their stead, albeit officers on telework are still expected to reply to their e-mails from home. Out-of-office messages should be both in the Maltese and English languages to ensure that both language preferences are met.

### **(c) Communication by Traditional Mail**

3.1.13. Each incoming request for information or guidance received through traditional mail, is to be checked, and a reply is to be submitted<sup>1</sup>within **one (1) working day** from the date of the receipt of such correspondence. A stamp indicating the date on which the correspondence is delivered to the receiving organisation, is to be marked on all incoming correspondence.

3.1.14. Whenever incoming requests/queries are of a complex nature and/or require consultation with internal/external stakeholders and therefore, it is not possible to submit a reply within one (1) working day, an acknowledgement shall be submitted, through traditional mail, within **one (1) working day** from the date of the receipt of the request/query.

The acknowledgement shall include a short note indicating the expected date by when a reply shall be given.

3.1.15. In all cases, a final reply shall be provided as follows:

- By not later than **three (3) working days** from the date of the receipt of the query;
- This timeframe may be extended to **five (5) working days**, for reasonably justified reasons;
- This time-frame may be extended up to ten (10) working days for reasonably justified reasons.

In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case, for instance in the case of issues regarding due diligence, legal aspects etc.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that his/her request is being processed and that owing to the nature of the case, more time is required for a final decision to be taken. An indication of the expected time by when the client should receive a reply should also be provided.

### **(d) Communication on the Social Media**

3.1.16. The provisions governing the use of social media in the Public Service, whether in an official or personal capacity, are stipulated in the “Policy on the Use of Social Media in the Public Service.”

3.1.17. Public officers who are authorised by their respective Permanent Secretary to engage in social media for official use, are expected to be courteous and polite when answering queries/requests received through social media platforms.

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<sup>1</sup>For the purpose of this Directive, correspondence by traditional mail is understood as having been submitted on the day that it leaves the department, whether if such correspondence is delivered by post or by hand.

3.1.18. Requests/queries received through the social media, should be replied within **two (2) hours** from being received, provided that such requests are received between 07:00am and 20:00hrs. Requests/queries received through the social media outside these hours shall be replied to immediately on the following working day. When the officer responsible for answering queries/requests received through the social media, is not in a position to provide a final reply, s/he should courteously direct the client making the query to the correct organisation.

3.1.19. When replying to posts on social media, public officers should identify themselves.

#### **4. TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS**

4.1. Public officers should answer phone calls promptly. When answering phone calls, officers should greet the caller with 'good morning'/'good afternoon', identify their organisation and give out their name and surname.

4.2. Phone calls should be answered in a professional and courteous manner, as in the case of any other form of communication. The use of informal and colloquial language, such as the Maltese terms "*hi*" and "*qalbi*" are inappropriate and should not be used.

4.3. Every officer is responsible to promptly answer any telephone in his/her office, including those on the desks of absent colleagues. Whenever an officer is not in the office, phone calls should be diverted to the desks of employees present at the office. Letting a telephone to ring more than three times is unacceptable.

Employees who are on telework are expected to divert their office telephone calls to their home/mobile phone.

4.4. Before putting the phone down, employees must ensure that the client has hung up first.

4.5. Whenever incoming phone calls cannot be answered immediately, the officer answering the call shall take the contact details of the client and inform him/her that s/he shall get back with the information required.

A final reply shall be provided within **twenty-four (24) hours** from when the phone call is received.

4.6. In the case of queries of a complex nature or which require the consultation with other stakeholders, the officer receiving the query shall give an indication of the expected final reply to the client. In any case, a final reply shall be provided as follows:

- By not later than **three (3) working days** from the date of the receipt of the query;
- This time-frame may be extended to **five (5) working days**, for reasonably justifiable reasons;
- This time-frame may be extended up to ten (10) working days for reasonably justifiable reasons.

In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary, may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case, for instance in the case of issues regarding due diligence, legal aspects etc.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that his/her request is being processed and that owing to the nature of the

case, more time is required for a final decision to be taken. An indication of the expected time by when the client should receive a reply should also be provided.

4.7. Before passing an incoming phone call to another organisation, the officer replying the phone call should first try to assist the client.

When the query/request made cannot be answered by the officer taking the phone call, the following procedure applies:

- The client should be notified that his/her call will be transferred to the responsible organisation.
- Before transferring the phone call, the officer answering should give the phone number of the officer to whom the call will be transferred so that in case that the transfer fails, the client can call directly the number provided.
- When transferring a call, officers should ensure that the call has successfully gone through.
- Officers transferring a call shall first make contact with the officer receiving the transferred call and not simply transfer the call and hang up. In this regard, if the line is busy, the client can be informed accordingly and provided with the appropriate phone number so that s/he can contact the officer responsible for his/her query accordingly.

4.8. Whenever a client asks specifically for an officer who is not in the office, the officer taking the call should try to assist the client's query. If the officer taking the call cannot address the query, s/he shall take note of the caller's contact details and inform him/her that s/he will be contacted by the officer concerned, giving an expected date when s/he will be contacted.

The officer taking the call is responsible to pass on the information to the officer concerned and ensure that the client is contacted back accordingly.

4.9. When receiving a call from a client who is seemingly frustrated, the officer taking the call should maintain calm and try to understand the client's concern, whilst keeping a neutral tone. At no time should officers taking such calls shout back at the client or be impolite towards the client.

## **5. APPOINTMENTS, QUEUES AND RECEPTION AREAS**

### **5.1. Maintaining Appointments**

5.1.1. Where clients are received by appointment, they should be served within **fifteen minutes** of their appointment time. Appointment times should be set so as to stagger the flow of visitors and minimise waiting times. It is important that appointments are allocated as realistically as practically possible, so as to avoid keeping visitors waiting too long for their turn.

5.1.2. If appointments are delayed for unavoidable reasons, waiting clients should be informed accordingly. Where possible, those with later appointments should be contacted by phone and given a revised time.

5.1.3. In the interest of maintaining appointments, clients who arrive early in the hope of being received ahead of time may be politely turned away or advised that they will have to wait until it is their turn be served.

## **5.2. Managing Queues**

5.2.1. Queues should be managed in an orderly and transparent manner through manual or, where possible, through electronic ticketing systems. A situation in which it is up to the waiting customers to determine the queuing order is unacceptable and reflects poorly on the government organisation concerned.

5.2.2. Officers managing queues should identify themselves, be courteous and polite at all times and direct clients where and as necessary.

5.2.3. Clients are entitled to wait and be served in a clean, friendly and welcoming environment. It is the responsibility of the senior and supervisory staff to ascertain that waiting areas are clean and welcoming and that the officers welcoming and receiving customers are courteous and polite.

## **5.3. Managing Reception Areas**

5.3.1. Reception areas welcoming clients should be manned at all times. It is the responsibility of senior and supervisory staff to make arrangements to ensure that the absence of officers attending reception areas is adequately covered.

5.3.2. Reception areas should not close down or be left unattended during opening business hours. Break times should be staggered so that reception areas are manned at all times.

5.3.3. Senior and supervisory staff should ensure that officers welcoming and receiving clients at reception areas are smart in appearance, and adequately trained in customer care skills and that they are conversant with the services offered by their department, to ensure that they are capable of assisting clients in a professional manner.

5.3.4. Officers serving clients at reception areas should greet customers and, be courteous and polite at all times. Officers are also expected to maintain calm and act professionally when dealing with frustrated customers.

5.3.5. The opening hours for clients should be clearly and easily visible for visitors (e.g. affixed to the the entrance door).

5.3.6. Organisations receiving clients should ensure they comply with the determinants of departmental standards, including that signs indicating directions for different sections are clearly visible to help direct clients. Lifts and bathrooms should also be clearly indicated.

5.3.7. Organisations receiving clients should be easily accessible especially by the elderly and people with disabilities.

## **6. PROVIDING INFORMATION AND MANAGING COMPLAINTS**

### **6.1. Providing Information to the Public**

6.1.1. Government organisations should provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information about their services. To this end, Ministries and departments must ensure that information on their official website is up-to-date. Ministries should also ensure that application forms and templates are available for download on their website, in line with Government's Digital Strategy. It is to be ensured that online information is accurate at the time it is accessed.

6.1.2. Government organisations should ensure that they are in compliance with article 17 of the Freedom of Information Act concerning the provision of information online.

6.1.3. Services offered through the freephone 153 is another important source of information for the public. This information should likewise be kept up-to-date and accurate. It is the responsibility of each government organisation to ensure that information concerning it, is accurately held by the *Freephone 153 service*, and to provide immediate updates as necessary.

### **6.2. Data protection**

6.2.1. All personal data pertaining to customers and employees should be treated in the strictest confidentiality and used only as permitted by the Data Protection Act.

6.2.2. It is not acceptable to use the Data Protection Act as an excuse to withhold information which members of the public are entitled to see. Heads of government organisations should be able to distinguish between personal data which is subject to protection, and information which may be subject to disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act.

6.2.3. Officers shall be guided by the provisions listed in the "Data Protection – Human Resources Corporate Procedures" when processing personal data of employees.

### **6.3. Addressing Complaints and Inquiries**

6.3.1. Government organisations providing services to the public should have a formal complaints procedure as a means of recourse for individuals who are not satisfied with the quality of service they have received.

6.3.2. The primary mechanism through which this requirement should be met is the *servizz.gov.mt*, which is an electronic mechanism for complaints and queries which is backed by a Government-wide network of Customer Care Officers. Government organisations that are part of the CCS network should investigate and settle requests according to the inbuilt standards in the CCS workflow software. Other government organisations should provide all necessary support to their Ministry's Customer Care Officer to ensure that requests are properly addressed and settled on time.

6.3.3. In addition to handling requests submitted through the CCS, government organisations should also establish a point of contact for customer complaints, feedback and inquiries via e-mail and by non-electronic means. The appropriate contact details should be publicised through the organisation's website and any other information material produced by it.

6.3.4. Complaints and inquiries received through the CCS should be handled in accordance with the standards and timeframes applicable to the CCS.

6.3.5. Public officers making complaints regarding HR entitlements in terms of Directive 8 should be guided by the provisions stipulated therein. Furthermore, the setting up of the Public Service one-stop-shop will also be addressing those complaints made by public officers and which the responsible Ministry failed to address.

## **7. SERVICES DELIVERED ONLINE**

7.1. In accordance with Government's Digital Malta Strategy, government organisations should invest in electronic service delivery mechanisms via the internet and, where possible, mobile phones. **This should be done through the fullest possible exploitation of shared e-government services.**

7.2. In addition, best use of technology should be made to integrate services with those of other government organisations and, where appropriate, private and non-government service providers (e-agents) so as to realise the Government's objective of delivering services in a seamless manner based on customer needs rather than organisational boundaries.

7.3. Where services are provided through conventional means, any necessary application forms should still be made available for downloading in an electronic format.

7.4. Services delivered online should cater for people with disabilities.

## **8. IMPLEMENTATION**

8.1. Permanent Secretaries, Directors General and Heads of Departments shall bring this Directive to the attention of all staff and are responsible to ensure compliance. It is important that newly engaged staff are aware and informed on this Directive 4-1 by their respective supervisor/Head of Department.

8.2. Compliance with this directive will also be monitored by the P&SD within the Office of the Prime Minister.

8.3. Heads of Department shall ensure that after not more than three years, staff should receive a refresher course on customer service excellence.

8.4 Failure to abide by this directive may be regarded as grounds for disciplinary proceedings.

8.5. This directive applies indefinitely unless specifically revoked or amended by the Principal Permanent Secretary.

Mario Cutajar  
Principal Permanent Secretary