



CONSOLIDATED SERVICE QUALITY STANDARDS

Office of the Principal
Permanent Secretary

Issued on 17 March 2010 by the Principal Permanent Secretary in terms of the Public Administration Act.

1. APPLICATION OF THIS DIRECTIVE

1.1. This directive applies to all ministries, departments, agencies and entities falling under the Public Administration Act (herein referred to as “government organisations”) and to all their employees.

1.2. This directive sets out standards of service quality pertaining to the following areas:

- (a) correspondence (both conventional and electronic) with the public
- (b) telephone communications
- (c) appointments and queues
- (d) provision of information and handling of complaints
- (e) service delivery mechanisms.

1.3. These standards are in keeping with the Code of Ethics which is annexed to the Public Administration Act and which requires public employees to serve all citizens fairly, reasonably, equitably and efficiently.

1.4. This directive consolidates, amends and supersedes past instructions on service standards which were issued in the form of OPM circulars, and it extends the applicability of the standards to agencies and entities.

1.5. Senior managers should ensure that their staff are aware of this directive and should keep track of adherence to the standards. Remedial action should be taken as a matter of priority if shortfalls in performance against the standards emerge.

1.6. The standards set out in this directive should also be regarded as superseding any commitments in Quality Service Charters that represent a lower level of service. Charter standards should otherwise continue to be maintained.

1.7. However, standards separately set for the health sector and for the Customer Care System (www.servizz.gov.mt) are not affected by this directive and will continue to apply.

2. CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE PUBLIC

Time limit for replies

2.1. A reply to incoming correspondence should be sent within five working days. If in the case of complex correspondence it is not possible to issue a definitive reply within this period, a provisional reply should still be sent indicating when a definitive reply is to be expected.

2.2. The above applies to written communications however received, including by e-mail or through contact us forms in official websites, and it refers to substantive replies rather than to acknowledgements. Simple acknowledgements may be dispensed with provided that the 5-day limit for substantive replies is observed.

2.3. Correspondence that cannot be answered by one organisation or section should be forwarded to the relevant organisation, section or person, and the client informed accordingly, within 5 working days. The forwarder should likewise reply to the client within five working days of receiving the forwarded correspondence.

Generic email accounts

2.4. Government organisations should encourage communication by electronic means. To this end government organisations should maintain a generic e-mail address as a first point of contact for members of the public. Generic e-mail accounts are a means to ensure that incoming e-mails do not go unanswered due to the absence of a particular member of staff. MITA policies on generic accounts may be found [here](#).

Use of official languages

2.5. Members of the public are entitled to correspond with government organisations in either Maltese or English according to their own choice. Replies to correspondence should be drawn up in whichever of these two languages is used by the original correspondent.

2.6. The Maltese characters ċ, ġ, għ, ħ, and ż should be used as appropriate in all printed correspondence in Maltese as well as in documents intended for publication in print or online.

Courtesy titles

2.7. Public employees may not dispense with titles (Prof., Dr, Mr, Ms etc) when addressing individuals. This applies to both conventional and electronic communications. In the case of letters sent by post the appropriate title should appear both in the letter and on the envelope.

2.8. Titles should also appear in stock letters or forms, including where possible those that are generated through automated means.

Identification of the sender in outgoing correspondence

2.9. Except in the case of stock correspondence generated through automated means, outgoing correspondence should clearly identify the member of staff who is sending it. A signature on its own is not enough for this purpose and the signatory's name should appear in clear print even if he or she is writing on behalf of his or her organisation head.

3. TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS

3.1. Public employees should answer phone calls promptly and identify their organisation or office immediately upon doing so.

3.2. Public employees should be professional and courteous to the public on the phone, as with other forms of communication. Informal styles of address such as the Maltese "hi" are inappropriate and should be avoided.

3.3. Every employee is responsible for promptly answering any telephone in his or her office, including those on the desks of absent colleagues. Where available, automated call transfer facilities are to be used to divert phone calls to the desks of employees present at the office. It is unacceptable to allow a telephone to ring unanswered during normal working hours.

3.4. If the employee taking a phone call cannot answer the caller's query, he or she should put the caller in contact with the competent person or section. The employee who is transferring the call should make sure that the caller has been successfully put through.

3.5. If a caller phones with a request that cannot be answered immediately (for instance because a file needs to be brought up), he or she should be phoned back by a member of staff once the relevant information has become available. It is not good enough simply to tell the caller to phone again later.

4. APPOINTMENTS AND QUEUES

Maintaining appointments

4.1. Where customers are seen by appointment, they should be received within fifteen minutes of their appointment time. Appointment times should be set so as to stagger the flow of visitors and minimise waiting times.

4.2. If appointments are delayed for unavoidable reasons, waiting customers should be informed. Where possible those with later appointments should be phoned and given a revised time.

4.3. In the interest of maintaining appointments, customers who arrive early in the hope of being seen ahead of time may be politely turned away or advised that they will have to wait.

Queues

4.4. Queues should be managed in an orderly and transparent manner through manual or electronic ticketing systems. A situation in which it is left to waiting customers themselves to determine the queue order is unacceptable and reflects poorly on the government organisation concerned.

4.5. Customers are entitled to wait and be served in a clean, friendly and welcoming environment.

5. INFORMATION AND COMPLAINTS

Provision of information to the public

5.1. Government organisations should provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information about their services.

5.2. The main avenue for the provision of such information should be the government organisation's website (or the relevant pages in that of the responsible ministry). Online information should be kept constantly up to date. It is a legitimate public expectation that information online should be accurate at the time it is accessed.

5.3. Government organisations should ensure that they are in compliance with article 17 of the Freedom of Information Act concerning the provision of information online. This article becomes binding on 31 July 2010.

5.4. The Department of Information's Freephone 153 service is another important source of information for the public. This information too should be kept up to date. It is the responsibility of each government organisation to check the accuracy of the information concerning it that is held by the Freephone 153 service, and to supply updates as soon as they become necessary.

Data protection

5.5. All personal data pertaining to customers and employees should be treated as confidential and may be used only as permitted by the Data Protection Act.

5.6. However, 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.

Handling complaints and inquiries

5.7. Government organisations which deliver 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.

5.8. The primary mechanism through which this requirement should be met is the Customer Care System (CCS) at www.servizz.gov.mt, an electronic vehicle 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 Customer Care Officer to ensure that requests are properly addressed and settled on time.

5.9. 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.

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

6. SERVICE DELIVERY MECHANISMS

6.1. In accordance with Stream 5 of Malta's Smart Island 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.

6.2. In addition, best use of technology should be made to integrate services with those of other government organisations and, where appropriate, private and nongovernment 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.

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

6.4. Service delivery mechanisms should cater for people with disabilities.

7. IMPLEMENTATION

7.1. Government organisations should be in compliance with the provisions of this directive as soon as possible and in any case by not later than 30 June 2010.

7.2. Compliance with this directive will be monitored by the Charter Support Unit within the Management Efficiency Unit, Office of the Prime Minister, which may undertake random checks for this purpose.

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

7.4. This directive applies indefinitely unless revoked. Dr G Grima Principal Permanent Secretary