

Directive no. 4-2

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

Issued on 3 October 2022 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 issued on 6th April 2017. 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. It applies also to any third-party contractor employees engaged in these government organisations.
- 1.2. The foundations of the Public Administration’s **Quality Service** are aligned to four pillars, namely: **Voice** - listening to, and understanding, the customer; **Design** - implementation of policies that meet customer expectations; **Package** services need to be of excellent quality, of high level and easily accessible; and, **Accountability** a foundation for an honest service, good governance and complete loyalty towards clients.
- 1.3. The standards required for service delivery are being reviewed with an 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 3rd October 2022.

2. OBJECTIVES

- 2.1. The People & Standards Division at OPM, through the Quality of Service Directorate, aims to ensure continuous improvement in the quality of services provided by the Public Administration to its external, 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’, or any other superseding document.
- 2.2. The primary aim of this Directive is to address the delivery of service by ensuring that internal and external clients have easy access to seamless services offered by the Public Administration, whilst ensuring that such services are of a high-quality standard, and delivered on time. This Directive also strives to address accountability, which is a fundamental concept based on honesty and integrity, whilst ensuring loyalty towards the customers.
- 2.3. All external and internal clients have a right to have their requests for information, guidance, and services offered by the Public Administration met and addressed with efficiency, fairness, impartiality, and integrity. To this end, and in order to enhance 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 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. 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 - including traditional and electronic mail;
- (b) Communication by means of telephony and in person;
- (c) Communication on social media;
- (d) Live Chats and Chat bot;
- (e) Maintaining appointments and managing queues and reception areas;
- (f) Providing information and addressing complaints;
- (g) Services delivered online.

It is understood that this Directive provides a generic framework for Quality of Service. Each department or entity is encouraged to adopt higher standards over and above, but in line with this Directive.

The service standards of specific and technical services, such as health services, are not affected by this Directive, and existing standards shall continue to apply following approval by the respective Permanent Secretary.

3. COMMUNICATION IN WRITING

3.1 General Provisions Governing Communication in writing

- 3.1.1. All incoming written correspondence shall be acknowledged and a final reply provided thereto within the timeframes stipulated in sections 3.2 to 3.5 below.
- 3.1.2. All 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. Therefore, correspondence commencing immediately with a reply, and/or answered in an abrupt manner, without any salutation 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 in line with 3.1.3.
- 3.1.5. All outgoing correspondence including traditional post shall be made on the department's official letterhead, in line with any official published guidelines. It should be signed and accompanied with the full name and surname of the officer sending the correspondence. This also applies in cases where the officer is replying on behalf of their superior.
- 3.1.6. Correspondence shall be in the language preferred by the client; hence correspondence received in English shall be replied to in 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 fonts (such as ċ, ġ, għ, ħ and ż), and vocabulary, shall be observed.
- 3.1.7. Any written communication provided to the client through face-to-face contact shall be written on official stationery.

3.2 Communication by Electronic Mail

- 3.2.1. Each incoming request for information or guidance received through e-mail is to be checked and acknowledged within **1 (one) working day** from the time they are received. Whenever a received request is incomplete, the client shall be duly informed of the required missing data/documentation, within **1 (one) working day** from the time of the receipt of the request.
- 3.2.2. Incoming requests/queries which can be addressed by the receiving organisation, and decisions thereof do not require further consultation, shall be replied in full within **1 (one) working day** from their receipt. In such cases, the acknowledgment as per paragraph 3.2.1 is not required.
- 3.2.3. Incoming requests/queries which are of a complex nature and/or require consultation with internal/external stakeholders and therefore cannot be replied to within 1 (one) working day (as per 3.2.2 above), this shall still be acknowledged as indicated in 3.2.1 above.

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

When requests / queries are of a complex nature, 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 exceptional and reasonably justified reasons.
- 3.2.4 In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case; for instance in issues regarding due diligence, and legal aspects. In such instances, the respective Permanent Secretary should inform the Quality of Service Directorate of these exemptions.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that their request is being processed and that owing to the nature of the case, more time is required for a final decision or reply to be provided. An indication of the expected time by which the client should receive a reply should also be provided. During exceptional circumstances, management need to ensure that the client is kept updated on a periodic basis, informing them that the query is still pending due to the given circumstance, and on the way forward.

- 3.2.5. In cases where requests/queries cannot be answered by the receiving organisation, or staff member, the latter shall send an acknowledgement to the client **within 1 (one) working day** from the receipt of the request/query informing them 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 will be forwarded shall be indicated in the notification sent to the client. Moreover, the client shall be provided with the name and contact number of the organisation or officer to whom the query is being forwarded. The organisation receiving the forwarded query shall abide by the timeframes stipulated in sections 3.2.2 – 3.2.3 above.
- 3.2.6. The provisions outlined under 3.2.5 above apply also to requests/queries received through generic e-mail accounts.
- 3.2.7 Generic email accounts shall have an automatic reply acknowledging receipt of emails in real time. Generic email accounts are to be accessed by more than one official to ensure continuity.

- 3.2.8. 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 shall indicate when they are expecting to be back in office, and the name and contact details of the officer who can be contacted in their stead. Out-of-office messages should be both in the Maltese and English languages.
- 3.2.9 Officers on telework or remote working are still expected to reply to their e-mails in the timeframes established by this Directive.

3.3 Communication by Traditional Mail

- 3.3.1. Each incoming request for information or guidance received through traditional mail, is to be checked, acknowledged, and a reply is to be sent¹ within **1 (one) working day** from the date of the receipt. An official stamp indicating the date on which the correspondence is delivered to the receiving organisation, must be marked on all incoming correspondence.

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

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

- By not later than **three (3) working days** from the date of 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 exceptional and justified reasons.

In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case, for instance in issues regarding due diligence and legal aspects. In such instances, the respective Permanent Secretary should inform the Quality of Service Directorate of these exemptions.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that their 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. During exceptional circumstances, management needs to ensure that the client is kept updated on a periodic basis, informing the client that their query is still pending due to the given circumstance, and on the way forward.

3.4 Communication on Social Media

- 3.4.1. The provisions governing the use of social media in the Public Service, are stipulated in the “Policy on the Use of Social Media in the Public Service.”
- 3.4.2. Public officers who are authorised by their respective Permanent Secretary, or an authorised delegate, to engage in social media for official use, are expected to be trained, courteous, and polite when answering queries/requests received through social media platforms.
- 3.4.3. Requests/queries received through the social media, shall be provided with a final reply within **2 (two) hours** from receipt provided that such requests are received within the official working hours of the respective department or entity. Requests/queries received through the social

¹ 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 such correspondence is delivered by post or by hand.

media outside these hours shall be provided with an automatic acknowledgement informing that a final reply will be provided within the **first 2 (two) hours** of the following working day.

3.4.4. When the officer responsible for answering queries/requests received through social media, is not in a position to provide a final reply, the client shall be asked to provide their contact details so they can be contacted back by the organisation via other means of communication.

3.4.5. When replying to posts on social media, public officers shall always identify themselves.

3.5 Communication via chatbot and live chat

3.5.1. Government organisations may decide to include a live chat feature on their websites as a way to provide their customers with an alternative communication means which alleviates the pressure from call centres with instant replies to queries.

3.5.2. Organisations which opt to offer their services through chat bot are to address the customer's query through artificial intelligence. The chat bot also needs to offer options and FAQs to direct the customers to the information which is already present on the website and is relevant to the query.

3.5.3. If the chat bot is not successful in satisfying the customer's needs, they should either

- (a) be directed to a live chat where a staff member employed by the organisation shall continue the interaction and provide the customer with a final reply online or;
- (b) be invited by the chat bot to provide their contact details so that they could be contacted back by the organisation via other means of communication.

3.5.4. The staff member communicating through the live chat should have at their disposal any previous correspondence with the client (i.e. the chat bot message) to ensure that the client would not need to repeat the query again.

3.5.5. Correspondence received through live chat shall be replied to within **1 (one) minute** from when the staff member receives the query (either directly or after having been redirected through the chat bot, if available).

3.5.6. If a final reply is not available within **15 (fifteen) minutes** from the initiation of the live chat, for reasonably justified exceptions, the client details should be requested by the organisation to contact back the client with a final answer by the end of the working day.

3.5.7. The above timeframes are applicable during official working hours as communicated to the client. Should a query be received by the live chat system outside working hours, an automatic reply should be in place, informing the client about the working hours and that their query will be answered on the next working day. An option for the client to provide their contact details so they can be contacted with a final reply should also be provided.

3.5.8. At the start of the interaction, the client should be given the option to choose the preferred language. Correspondence shall then 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 fonts (such as ċ, ġ, ġħ, ħ and ż) and vocabulary shall be observed.

3.5.9. Officers responsible for the live chat are to be trained, courteous, and polite when answering queries/requests received through social media platforms.

4. TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS

- 4.1. Public officers should answer phone calls promptly within a maximum of three rings. When answering phone calls, officers should invariably greet the caller with 'good morning'; 'good afternoon', in the right tone; identify their organisation, and give 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 language, such as colloquial Maltese and English terms (e.g. "hi" and "qalbi" "dear" and "lovely") are inappropriate and shall not be used.
- 4.3. Before putting the phone down, employees must ensure that the client has hung up first.
- 4.4. Every officer is responsible to promptly answer any telephone in their 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 ring more than three times is unacceptable.

Employees who are remote workers are expected to divert their office telephone calls to their home/mobile phone and these shall be answered in line with 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 above.

- 4.5. For call centres, if a call is transferred to an answering machine, the connection should be immediate. While it is understandable that during a high traffic of incoming calls, the client may need to wait to be assisted, the answering machine should be equipped with a facility informing the client the time within which they will be assisted or inform them of the number of persons in line awaiting their call to be responded. As much as possible, answering machines should have a comprehensive selection menu and which fits the type of queries or services offered by the organisation.
- 4.6. Whenever queries through incoming phone calls cannot be immediately answered, the officer answering the call shall take the contact details of the client and inform them that they shall get back with the information required.

A final reply shall be provided within **1 (one) working day** from when the phone call is received.

- 4.7. In the case of queries of a complex nature or which require the consultation with other stakeholders, the officer receiving the query shall indicate 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 timeframe may be extended to **five (5) working days**, for reasonably justifiable reasons;
 - This timeframe may be extended up to **ten (10) working days** for exceptional and justifiable reasons.

In exceptional cases, the respective Permanent Secretary, may concede a longer period, depending on the nature of the case, for instance in issues regarding due diligence and legal aspects. In such instances, the respective Permanent Secretary should inform the Quality of Service Directorate of these exemptions.

In all cases requiring a delay in the provision of a final reply, for justifiable reasons, the client shall invariably be informed that their request is being processed, and that owing to the nature of the case, more time is required for a final decision to be provided. During unforeseen circumstances,

management needs to ensure that the client is to be kept updated on a periodic basis, informing the client that their query is still pending due to the given circumstances, and on the way forward.

- 4.8. Before transferring an incoming phone call to another organisation, the officer taking 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 shall be notified that their call will be transferred to the responsible organisation, when a call transfer is possible. If the call cannot be transferred to the other organisation for technical or logistical reasons, the officer should provide the contact number of the respective organisation to the client.
 - Before transferring the phone call, the officer answering the call shall give the phone number of the officer or organisation to whom the call will be transferred, so in case the transfer fails, the client can call directly on the number provided.
 - Should the organisation have an official approved policy not to provide internal extension numbers to external clients, the officer answering the call should ask the for the client's contact details so in case the call transfer fails, the client will be immediately contacted back by the responsible officer/organisation.
 - When transferring a call, officers should ensure that the call has successfully gone through.
 - Officers transferring a call shall first contact the officer receiving the transferred call and not simply transfer the call and hang up. In this regard, if the line is busy, the officer shall take note of the client's contact details and inform him/her that s/he will be contacted by the officer concerned.
- 4.9. Whenever a client asks specifically for an officer who is not in the office, the officer taking the call shall do their best to assist the client's query. If the officer taking the call cannot address the query, they shall take note of the client's contact details and inform them that they will be contacted by the officer concerned, giving an expected date by when they will be contacted. Officers should avoid at all costs asking the clients to call back at a later date or call another telephone number, but make provisions so that a call back to the client is made.

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.

- 4.10. When receiving a call from a client who is apparently frustrated, the officer taking the call shall remain calm and try to understand the client's concern, whilst keeping a neutral tone. At no time shall officers taking such calls adopt inappropriate behaviour.

5. APPOINTMENTS, QUEUES, AND RECEPTION AREAS

5.1. Maintaining Appointments

If an appointment is requested, the customer will be informed with the appointment date and time within **2 (two) working days**, unless the Permanent Secretary directs otherwise in exceptional and justified cases.

- 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. Appointments must be allocated as realistically and practically as possible, to avoid excessive waiting time. Clinical health services may be exempted as the need arises.
- 5.1.2. If appointments are delayed for unavoidable reasons, waiting clients shall be informed accordingly. Those with later appointments should be contacted by phone and given a revised appointment time, so as to avoid unnecessary waiting.
- 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 to be served.
- 5.1.4. During unforeseen circumstances (e.g. industrial action), or whenever appointments are cancelled, clients must be informed of any cancellations and kept up-to-date and informed about their prospective appointment on a periodic basis.

5.2. Managing Queues

- 5.2.1. Queues should be managed in an orderly and transparent manner through manual or, where possible, electronic ticketing systems. Priority is given to persons with disabilities who are holders of special ID.
- 5.2.2. Officers managing queues shall identify themselves, be courteous and polite at all times, and direct clients and as necessary to be served.
- 5.2.3. Clients are entitled to wait and be served in a clean, friendly, secure, and welcoming environment. It is the responsibility of all senior and supervisory staff to ascertain that waiting areas are kept clean, secure, and welcoming and that the officers receiving customers are courteous, presentable, and polite.

5.3 Managing Reception Areas

- 5.3.1. Reception areas welcoming clients should be accessible for persons with disabilities in line with any applicable legislation.
- 5.3.2. Reception areas should always be manned during business hours. It is the responsibility of all senior and supervisory staff to ensure that the absence of officers attending reception areas is adequately covered. Break times should be staggered so that reception areas are adequately manned at all times.
- 5.3.3. Management shall ensure that customers-welcoming and customers-receiving officers at reception areas are smart in appearance, fluent in Maltese and English, adequately trained, and fully aware of this Directive. Customer-receiving officers are to be conversant with the services offered by their organisation, to ensure that they are capable of assisting clients in a professional manner.
- 5.3.4. Officers serving clients at reception areas shall greet customers and be courteous and polite at all times. Officers are also expected to keep calm and act professionally when dealing with complaints.
- 5.3.5. Officers serving customers shall identify themselves clearly to the clients by providing their name verbally or through name tags. The client shall easily identify who are the employees through tags, uniforms, and/or established dress-code.

- 5.3.6 The opening hours for clients should be clearly and easily visible for visitors before entering the premises and on any communication channel.
- 5.3.7. Any organisation should comply with any branding guidelines applicable within the Public Administration.
- 5.3.8 Offices and any published material pertaining to Government organisations shall be easily accessible especially by persons with disabilities in line with the prevailing regulations and guidelines.
- 5.3.9 The officer is required to reply in the same language (Maltese or English) the client is communicating with.

6. PROVIDING INFORMATION AND MANAGING COMPLAINTS

6.1. Providing Information to the Public

- 6.1.1. Government organisations shall provide clear, accurate, and up-to-date information about their services. For this purpose, Ministries, departments, and all public entities must ensure that the information available on their official website and social media page is up to date. It must be ensured that online information is accurate at the time it is accessed. Ministries shall also ensure that application forms and templates are available as e-forms on their website.
- 6.1.2. Government organisations shall ensure that they are in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act.
- 6.1.3 Websites of Government organisations shall be easily accessible especially by persons with disabilities in line with the prevailing regulations and guidelines.
- 6.1.4. Services offered through the servizz.gov should 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 servizz.gov and to provide immediate updates as necessary.
- 6.1.5 All services offered through servizz.gov should be regulated by a service level agreement in line with the requirements of this Directive.

6.2. Data protection

- 6.2.1. All personal data pertaining to customers and employees shall be treated in the strictest confidentiality and used only as permitted by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)EU 2016/679 and the Data Protection Act CAP 586.
- 6.2.2. It is not acceptable to use the General Data Protection Regulation as an excuse to withhold information which members of the public are entitled to see or request copies of, as provided for in the GDPR. Heads of government organisations shall 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 (FOI).
- 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.

- 6.2.4. Management shall ensure that officers involved in such jobs shall be trained and continuously updated about changes regarding FOI and Data Protection.

6.3. Addressing Complaints and Inquiries

- 6.3.1. Government organisations providing services to the public shall have a formal complaints procedure and a database as a means of recourse for individuals who are not satisfied with the quality of service they have received.
- 6.3.2. Government organisations shall investigate and settle requests according to the standards established by this Directive. They should also establish a point of contact for customer complaints, feedback, and inquiries via e-mail and non-electronic means. The appropriate contact details should be publicised through the organisation's website and any other information material.
- 6.3.3. Complaints and inquiries received through the servizz.gov should be handled in accordance with the standards and timeframes applicable by this Directive. Government organisations should establish a service level agreement with servizz.gov to address these complaints in line with the requirements of this Directive.
- 6.3.4. The Public Service one-stop-shop within the People & Standards Division will also be addressing those complaints made by public officers and which the Ministry responsible failed to address.

7. SERVICES DELIVERED ONLINE

- 7.1. Government organisations shall invest in electronic service delivery mechanisms via the internet and, where possible, mobile telephony. **This should be done through the fullest possible exploitation of shared e-government services.**
- 7.2. In addition, best use of technology shall be made to integrate services with those of other government organisations and, where appropriate, private and non-government service providers, so as to realise Government's objective of delivering services in a seamless manner based on customer needs rather than organisational boundaries.
- 7.3. Services delivered online shall cater for people with disabilities in accordance to guidelines established by the responsible representative organisation.

8. IMPLEMENTATION

- 8.1. Permanent Secretaries, Directors General, and Heads of Departments or Entities shall bring this Directive to the attention of all staff and are responsible to ensure compliance. It is important that all staff, in particular newly-engaged staff, are aware and trained on this Directive by their respective supervisor/Head of Department.
- 8.2. The Department or entity should have a formal internal mechanism to ensure full compliance with this Directive. Each Ministry should have a person (s) responsible for Quality of Service who shall work in liaison with the Quality of Service Directorate within the People & Standards Division.
- 8.3. Compliance with this Directive will also be monitored by the Quality for Service Directorate within People & Standards Division, OPM.

- 8.4. Heads of Departments and Entities shall ensure that after not more than three years, staff shall receive refresher training on customer service and the requirements of this Directive.
- 8.5. Failure to abide by this Directive may be regarded as grounds for disciplinary proceedings.
- 8.6. This Directive applies indefinitely unless specifically revoked or amended by the Principal Permanent Secretary.

Tony Sultana
Principal Permanent Secretary