

Quality of Service Provision for Residents in Local Authorities

Summary

General Background

Services provided by the local authorities directly impact the quality of life and welfare of their respective resident populations. The local authorities face a considerable challenge: they must provide quality public services and products at low cost, yet at the same time at a high standard of service.

Audit Actions

During the period of August 2015 – February 2016 the Israel State Comptroller's Office audited the provision of service to the residents (in the areas specified below) in the **municipalities of Elad, Bnei Brak, Hadera, Petach Tikva, Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** as well as in the **Shafir Regional Council** (hereinafter: "the audited local authorities"). This was followed by a survey of the Ministry of Interior's manner of implementing the audit report's recommendations (hereinafter: "Basket of Services Report")¹ for the establishment of a basket of services for local authorities. A complementary inspection was carried out by the Resident's Service Improvement Unit at the Civil Service Commission. The inspection team toured the public reception facilities of the respective local authorities on different dates, checking each facility several times. The findings from these visits were documented by photographs, some of which were incorporated into the report.

The departments inspected in the audit included the welfare departments (the common name used hereinafter for all units of the local authorities dealing with this area and surveyed in this audit²), education departments, payment collection departments and the municipal call center. The audit focused on how these departments supply services to the residents and visitors arriving at the premises of the local authorities, generally during the initial meeting with them, at the service window or at the service site's entrance. In addition, the audit stressed the physical condition of the service windows and their surroundings, including the state of the facilities complementing the needs of those coming to receive service at the various departments, such as the restroom cubicles, the availability or absence of water coolers/dispensers, the accessibility of service site entrances to persons with restricted mobility, and more. Being that today, a substantial and important part of municipal services for residents is provided over the phone or internet, these channels of service were surveyed as well, such as: the

¹ The State Comptroller, **Reports on the Audit of Local Government for the Years 2011-2012** (2012), "Municipal Basket of Services in the Local Authorities," pp. 3-17.

² In the **municipalities of Elad and Shfar'am** these are designated "social services department," in the **municipalities of Bnei Brak and Petach Tikva** – "social services division," in the **Hadera municipality** – "welfare division," in the **Kiryat Yam municipality** – "welfare and social services division," and in the **Shafir Regional Council** – "welfare and social services department."

existence of a website providing up-to-date data and services for the resident³ and the phone response provided by the municipal call center to inquirers.

Major Shortcomings

Procrastination of the Ministry of Interior in Promoting the Establishment of the Basket of Services

It is some 40 years now that the Ministry of Interior has been studying the possibility of defining a standard basket of services for the local authorities and establishing performance indexes for them. From the "Basket of Services Report" it emerges that statutes, dealing, directly or indirectly, with the duty of the local authorities to provide services to the residents, do not establish a detailed basket of services that the local authority must provide to its residents, and does not even determine the minimum service standards it must provide in each area of service. In its response to the State Comptroller's Office from July 2012, and also in its response to the present report's findings, the Ministry of Interior announced that it is working in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance to set up a joint team to examine the establishment of a normative basket of services, and that the Interior Ministry's position will be formulated upon completion of the team's work.

A follow-up of the matter showed that apart from the release of a policy research paper⁴ on the topic of "A Basket of Services in the Local Authority" by the Interior Ministry in June 2013, there has been no further progress on the issue of defining the basket of services.

Non-Establishment of a Service Charter by Local Authorities

At the time of the audit, the **municipalities of Elad, Hadera, Petach Tikva, Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** had not yet established any service charters. Only after the audit did the **Elad municipality** formulate a service charter for all the municipality's departments, and the **Bnei Brak municipality** distributed a pamphlet to its residents, setting out the service charter for the sanitation department alone.

Deficiencies in Monitoring Waiting Times for Receiving Service

The **Elad municipality** failed to round up data on a regular basis regarding the waiting time for receiving service in the collection department. The **municipalities of Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** did not arrange a mechanism for collecting data on a regular basis concerning the waiting time for reception at the collection departments.

During the audit of the **Elad municipality**, the maximum waiting time for receiving service measured in the collection department was 75 minutes. In the **Petach Tikva municipality**, the waiting times for a

³ See also: The State Comptroller, **Reports on the Audit of Local Government for the Year 2015** (2015), "Management and Operation of Websites by the Local Government," pp. 229-278.

⁴ **A Binding Basket of Services in the Local Authority**, Ministry of Interior, Local Government Administration, Senior Division for Municipal Administration, Research and Information Division (June 2013).

meeting with the representative handling discounts on Arnona (municipal property tax) rates for residential use were 73 minutes, 53 minutes and 39 minutes.

The longest average monthly waiting time measured in the Arnona discounts department at the **Petach Tikva municipality** was an hour and a quarter in January and 54 minutes in February.

In the **Shfar'am municipality**, there was no municipal call center service at the time of the audit. A municipal call center manager was appointed only after the inspection. At the time of the audit, the **municipalities of Elad and Kiryat Yam** did not collect data on the waiting time of inquirers who phoned the call center.

Deficiencies in Providing Accessibility to Service Spaces for Persons with Disabilities

The structures of the audited local authorities did not comply with the accessibility requirements prescribed by law. Many structures lacked parking spaces for disabled persons near the public reception facilities. The only two parking spaces for disabled persons adjacent to the **Shfar'am municipality** were occupied by vehicles not bearing a disabled person's parking card. A disabled person riding in a wheelchair cannot enter the collection department at the **Hadera municipality** through the entrance adjacent to the disabled persons' parking space, as said unit is situated on an intermediate floor where the elevator does not stop. The **municipalities of Bnei Brak and Shfar'am** provide a ramp for wheelchair users; however, its slope does not comply with the statutory requirement and endangers those using it.

The inspected local authorities did not provide restrooms for disabled persons as required by law. The unit handling disabled persons at the **Bnei Brak municipality** has no disabled person restrooms. In the kindergarten department at the **Petach Tikva municipality**, the disabled person restroom cubicle was found locked and the workers could not find the keys. The disabled person restrooms for men and women were found locked in the Eshkol Payis structure where the **Kiryat Yam municipality** manages the process of enrollment to educational institutions.

Failure to Protect Privacy of Service Recipients

The **municipalities of Bnei Brak, Hadera, Petach Tikva and Kiryat Yam** did not take all measures required by law to protect the privacy of residents applying to the welfare units. For example, personal charts of service recipients were kept in unlocked places and found in the corridors.

Deficiencies in the Provision of Online Services

The **Petach Tikva and Shfar'am municipalities** did not post on their websites the latest up-to-date Arnona (Municipal Tax) Order as required by law.

The audited local authorities did not note on their websites whether the sites comply with the requirements set out in the Regulations for Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Adjustments for Service Accessibility), 5773-2013.

Poor Physical Conditions at Service-Providing Locations

The audited local authorities did not post signs in a conspicuous spot inside the authority's buildings, clearly specifying the public reception hours and ways of contacting the departments.

In the **Bnei Brak municipality** the public reception areas contained damp spots and mold, the walls were in need of plastering, the floors and acoustic ceilings were damaged and the furniture was dilapidated.

In the **Hadera municipality**, even three years after the release of the municipal comptroller's report, the serious physical defects found in the welfare departments and after-school child care facilities and noted in the report had not yet been repaired. Leaks and malfunctioning sewage systems were found in the structures housing municipal public reception departments. The municipality building itself contained damaged acoustic ceilings, walls in need of plastering and electrical outlets pulled out of their sockets. The municipality did not maintain the cleanliness of the outside surroundings of its public reception facilities.

In the **Petach Tikva municipality** the entrance to the "Warm Home for Ultraorthodox Youth in Distress" passes through a staircase with a crooked railing, flanked by discarded items of furniture, beneath peeling ceilings. There were damp spots in the kitchen and on the porch of the "warm home" itself. Ceilings were peeling in the "Sha'aria" regional office.

In the **Kiryat Yam municipality**, the "Kalanit" child-care facility has serious defects which endanger the wellbeing of the children visiting the facility: a sandbox with a collapsed awning, containing sand that has not been replaced; a tree that collapsed into the facility's garden and has not been removed; cracks in the building's wall; ceiling and walls in need of plastering and covered with mold.

In the **Shfar'am municipality**, there were maintenance defects in the structure housing the social services department, such as damp spots and no external cladding on the structure.

In the **Shafir Regional Council**, there were deep cracks in the walls and dampness in the structure housing the welfare and social services department, and mold on the walls of the collection department.

The audited local authorities failed to properly maintain the working environment and facilities, particularly in public reception areas and places where the city residents wait to receive service. Seats and covers were not installed on all toilets in the restrooms. Care was not taken to ensure the provision of toilet paper holders, toilet paper, and soap for washing hands, as well as hand drying machines or paper for wiping hands.

The audited local authorities failed, as required by law, to station water coolers/dispensers in a central place, accessible to the general public, or nearby, wherever the public is received. The municipalities of **Hadera, Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** did not take care to ensure the supply of cups alongside the drinking facilities.

Principal Recommendations

The Ministry of Interior should define as a central target the establishment of a binding minimum basket of services for the local authorities, and should continue to work to promote the preparation of a basket of services, as emerges from the ministry's answer from July 2012 brought in the State Comptroller's report from the same year, in order to ensure the provision of municipal services for the residents.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, the **municipalities of Hadera, Petach Tikva, Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** should establish and publicize a service charter. The **Elad municipality** should announce to its resident population the service charter it formulated; the **Bnei Brak municipality** should complete a service charter for additional departments; such steps will streamline and improve the service and increase the public trust. The **Hadera municipality** should work to complete the standard service times, while the **Shfar'am municipality** should work to establish them.

The **municipalities of Elad, Kiryat Yam and Shfar'am** should arrange a mechanism for the collection of information on a regular basis regarding the public's waiting time at the collection departments.

The **municipalities of Elad and Petach Tikva** should study ways to reduce the waiting time for receiving service at their collection departments.

The **Shfar'am municipality** should start to operate at the earliest the municipal call center services, so as to enable efficient, effective, centralized and comprehensive handling of residents' inquiries.

The **Kiryat Yam municipality** should collect data on the waiting time of inquirers who call the municipal call center service.

The audited local authorities should work to make the public reception areas accessible also to persons with restricted mobility, as required by law.

All the audited local authorities should state on their websites whether they meet the statutory requirements regarding accessibility for persons with disabilities.

In the opinion of the State Comptroller's Office, in order to make it easier for the public to locate service departments and find their way around the offices quickly and easily, the audited local authorities

should post clear signs in prominent places, specifying the details of the various departments, the public reception times (days and hours) and ways of contacting the departments.

The audited local authorities should work to improve the physical condition of the public reception facilities and assure basic hygienic conditions which respect the dignity of the residents who come to the premises to receive service.

The **Hadera municipality** should act without delay to obtain the certification of the firefighting authorities regarding the intactness of the structure housing the welfare division, in order to prevent any danger to its employees and to the public arriving there to receive service.

The audited local authorities should properly install a seat with cover on all toilets, and see to the availability of toilet paper, soap and hand drying facilities (using air or paper).

In order to improve the service, the audited local authorities should make sure to place water coolers/dispensers and cups in a central spot, accessible to the general public, wherever the public receives service.

Conclusion

Services provided by the local authorities directly impact the quality of life and welfare of their respective resident populations.

The inspection of the local authorities' public reception facilities, revealed many deficiencies in the public accessibility to the service site entrances and in the service sites themselves. In the collection departments of some of the local authorities inspected, the waiting time for receiving service was an hour and longer. Deficiencies were found also in the provision of online services in some of the inspected local authorities. The inspection also revealed many flaws in the signs directing the public to the service site entrances and in the physical conditions (damaged walls and ceilings, restrooms in poor condition, absence of water coolers/dispensers or their stationing in places not in accordance with the law), some of them very serious and some likely to be interpreted as disrespect for the service recipients and an insult to their dignity.

The local authorities should work to provide accessibility to the service site entrances for persons with disabilities, reduce waiting time for receiving service, and improve online services. Also, they should make it easier for visitors to find the service site entrances, by posting signs that specify department reception hours and contact details. Likewise, they should ascertain proper upkeep and maintenance of cleanliness in public reception areas, and assure suitable sanitary conditions in the restrooms.