

SECTION 3: IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF SERVICES

3.1 Developing a communications strategy

3.1 Developing a communications strategy

The Communications Strategy is a varied set of initiatives devised to complement and facilitate the implementation of substantive changes in the public service by:

- promoting a positive image of the public service, particularly of departments or units that provide licensing and similar certification services either to the general public, or to well-defined customer groups, or that provide welfare or municipal services;
- implementing minor but highly visible measures aimed at securing immediate improvements in commonly used services
- promoting understanding of specific initiatives among employees that are affected by them; and
- communicating the plans and progress of public service reforms as they unfold.

The Strategy is directed by a functional Group within the Management Systems Unit, reporting directly to the Chairman.

The Communications Strategy is not a conventional public relations exercise: it does not supplement or replace either the public relations officers employed by ministers, or the official press and public information service, which is handled by the Department of Information. Its task is primarily that of addressing a longstanding legacy of grievance, mistrust or misunderstanding as between citizens and the public authorities that are meant to serve them.

The context for change

Two principal reasons account for the existence of the Communications Strategy.

The first is that public interest in the operation of Malta's governmental services is both keen and highly critical. Both the Public Service Reform Commission and the Operations Review commented on the origins and effects of this scrutiny, identifying widespread popular anger at delayed or poor quality service, and a concomitant feeling of helplessness in regard to the ordinary citizen's dealings with government authorities. They recommended not only ongoing, well-targeted communication of policies and procedures for transacting business with government organisations, but also measures intended to alleviate quickly the most irritating

shortcomings at the interface between selected public authorities and the citizens served by them.

The second reason is that within the public service itself, mechanisms for communicating human resource management policies to members of staff were rudimentary, or relied on the intermediation of trade unions. The leadership of the public service required up-to-date and multiple channels of communication to inform, explain, motivate.

Implementing change

The outlines of a communications strategy were first sketched out by the Operations Review Consultant in 1989. A communications consultant was commissioned the following year to develop the strategy at the time that the three new central change agencies were being established, and *ad hoc* provision was made in the Financial Estimates for that year, independently of the allocations for existing information services. The Communications Strategy Group which came together to implement the early initiatives was then incorporated into the Management Systems Unit.

Two major initiatives launched the Group's activities:

- founding of *Il-Holqa (The Link)*, a monthly newspaper that is circulated to every public officer, and is the principal vehicle for informing government employees of the aims, plans and progress of administrative reforms; the newspaper has tempered its earlier sober tone, by incorporating 'human interest' items, such as profiles of selected employees and interviews with high-ranking civil servants, as well as entertaining items.
- re-organisation and refurbishing of the Parcel Post Office, a leading cause of complaints from both the business community and the general public; the interface between officials and customers was given particular attention, so that improvements were made to procedures for the examination and release of parcels, facilities for release of parcels at district post offices enhanced, and training in customer relations given to staff at the Office.

These two initiatives – one corporate, the other local – are examples of the types of projects undertaken by the Communications Strategy Group, and served as models for subsequent initiatives.

The Communications Strategy is complemented by two closely related types of communication initiative.

First, each project plan dealing with substantive policy, managerial or administrative reform must factor a communications strategy for that particular project: responsibility for communicating the benefits arising from that initiative lies with the MSU project manager, and with the public officers involved in that project.

Secondly, as the 'owner' and principal beneficiary of substantive policy or management innovations within its jurisdiction, each ministry carries ultimate responsibility for communicating change under way within it. In order to help ministries attain this objective, the creation of Ministry Communication Branches reporting to permanent secretaries is under consideration.

The Communications Strategy is not bound by a finite timescale: as change is ongoing, its communication is also, of necessity, ongoing. Certain projects, notably those of a corporate nature such as *Il-Holqa*, are also open-ended. However, other projects, especially those linked with implementation of substantive policy and managerial changes, work to a timeframe determined by that of the substantive project.

The Strategy targets a number of audiences and initiatives vary accordingly:

- The public service is both the major customer for corporate projects, as well as the principal audience. The leading corporate projects include *Il-Holqa* as well as on-going development, production and distribution of theme posters to ministries and departments. Past poster campaigns have dealt with the public service's mission statement, cleanliness in government offices, health and safety, and customer service.
- Numerous briefings, conferences and meetings with constituted bodies or public officers are organised, in conjunction with the Staff Development Organisation, to explain change initiatives under way, and to respond to questions, criticism or suggestions.
- Information leaflets promoting and communicating services offered by ministries and departments have also been designed and circulated. Services targeted for the dissemination of information included social benefits, housing benefits, consumer protection and Customs.
- Projects addressing customers' first impressions have been undertaken at the Parcel Post Office, Police Licensing Office, Passport Office, Public Registry and the Hospital Out-Patients Dispensary. Activities included simplification of procedures to reduce waiting time; refurbishment of offices and waiting rooms; and specifically designed training to improve switchboard and reception skills. Telephone training has been extended to all ministries and departments to ensure better frontline customer services.

- The Information Service System was introduced to provide the public with a twelve-hour telephone service allowing them to obtain information on services provided by government. This has since been complemented by fully-automated booths in towns and villages.
- The community is addressed through projects which focus on service-oriented organisations such as civic centres, social security district offices and police stations. The projects attempt to improve the quality of the working environment and the service provided; pilot studies are frequently undertaken to set standards for larger initiatives. There are also ongoing educational campaigns over the broadcasting media to promote safe driving and environmental awareness. Overhead directional road signage and conventional signage that meets European Union standards is being introduced on highways and main traffic arteries.

While all of these projects are led or serviced by the Communications Strategy Group, each would be directed by a working party that comprises representatives of the client organisation. In the case of *Il-Holqa*, an editorial board, chaired by a public officer approved by the Cabinet Committee for Reform, directs the initiative.