



'Mystery Shopper - Enhanced performance in the Public Administration leading to Service of Excellence'

**Case study of Maltese ESF project under the study
'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to
Public Administration' (PAPA)**

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Mystery Shopper - enhanced performance in the public administration leading to service of excellence

Operational Programme	Operational Programme II for EU Structural Funds Investments for 2014-2020 (ESF.04.078), Priority Axis 4, Name of Operation: 'Mystery Shopper - Enhanced performance in the Public Administration leading to Service of Excellence'
Beneficiary organisation	People and Standards Division (Office of the Prime Minister)
Target groups	Customers at various service stations throughout the Ministries and Departments across the Public Service.
Project duration	01/03/2016 - 31/12/2020 (approval from PPCD to extend the project until December 2022).
Budget	Total eligible value: EUR 2,150,000 (ESF contribution: EUR 1,725,000 + Malta's Share EUR 430,000)
Project manager (email address)	Mr Joseph Bugeja, Director, Quality and Standards, People and Standards Division, Office of the Prime Minister (joseph.j.bugeja@gov.mt)
Partners	N/A
Project/organisation website	https://publicservice.gov.mt/en/people/Pages/QualityandStandardsDirectorate/QualityStandardsDirectorate.aspx

This case study was produced during the 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to Public Administration - PAPA' project that was contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project was to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration for accountability purposes. This report provides a story on the project '**Mystery Shopper - Enhanced performance in the Public Administration leading to Service of Excellence**', which discusses its context and purpose; characteristics of the team implementing it; main challenges faced and difficulties encountered during implementation; key developments during the implementation process; results and impacts achieved; as well as lessons learnt and the contribution of ESF.

MYSTERY SHOPPER PROJECT

Background

This case study mainly concerns the implementation of a change management programme through a package of public service reforms. Previous reform initiatives, undertaken during the 1990s and early 2000s, had focused on improving the internal structures of the public service, but did not address the annoyance a citizen faces when accessing a public service and finding the experience too cumbersome. According to Dr. Joyce Cassar, the Permanent Secretary for People and Standards in the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), 'the fundamental issues that became apparent were how to change the customer experience when accessing government services from a frustrating one to a highly satisfactory one, and how to add value to the overall customer experience when accessing a public service.'

This change management programme stemmed from the desire of the OPM's Principal Permanent Secretary, the Head of the Public Service, to increase service quality by instigating a 'Service of Excellence' approach, and the need to select a suitable method for taking it forward. While several other tools were potentially applicable (including customer effort scores, post-service ratings, follow-up surveys, social media monitoring, documentation analysis, and objective service metrics), a combination of the mystery shopping approach with the SERVQUAL instrument and its 10 determinants of service quality was considered to be the best blend to carry out an efficient assessment of the public service. This case study considers the contribution of the Mystery Shopper project to implementing the change management programme and the related assortment of reforms to increase the quality of public services provided to a diverse set of customers.

Research into the meaning of the 'mystery shopping' concept revealed differences in interpretation. For instance, the Cambridge dictionary defines mystery shopping as the activity of pretending to be a normal customer, when you are employed by a company, to check how its products or services are being sold. On the other hand, the Collins dictionary defines mystery shopping as a person who is employed to visit establishments, incognito, and assess the quality of the service being offered. While the first definition centres on the mechanics of service provision, the second introduces the concept of quality assessment.

The Quality and Standards Directorate was set up within the People and Standards Division to take ownership of the Mystery Shopper project. At the start of the exercise, the Directorate lacked the resources or the expertise, and hence, consultancy companies were engaged with the contribution of EUR 2.15 million through ESF and national funding.

The Mystery Shopper project commenced in 2017 and must be viewed in the context of Malta's extraordinary economic growth, its programme of continuous public administration reforms and its government policy to foster a closer and obliging relationship with customers, be they individual citizens, members of civil society, or the business community. According to Permanent Secretary Joyce Cassar: 'The Mystery Shopper project did not just happen. It evolved over several years, supported by dynamic and visionary leadership, leading to public service reforms at all levels, particularly those related to organisation and management of government, policy making, coordination and implementation, civil service systems and human

resource management, transparency and accountability, and service delivery and eServices. Moreover, the Mystery Shopper project cannot be viewed in isolation. It is the result and outcome of a concerted effort at reforming the Public Service administration.'

Challenges for continuous public service change

The catalyst and driving force for the Mystery Shopper project was the growing contemporary societal need for a customer care-oriented service. The status quo is no longer acceptable and has emerged as a major challenge for the Public Service. Gone are the days where lengthy public service processes are permitted to continue without revision and improvement. This view can be aligned with the global trend of constantly changing customer expectations of public services and increasing demand for better quality. To meet and exceed these expectations, a key challenge for public service management is to streamline processes and eliminate those processes that do not add value.

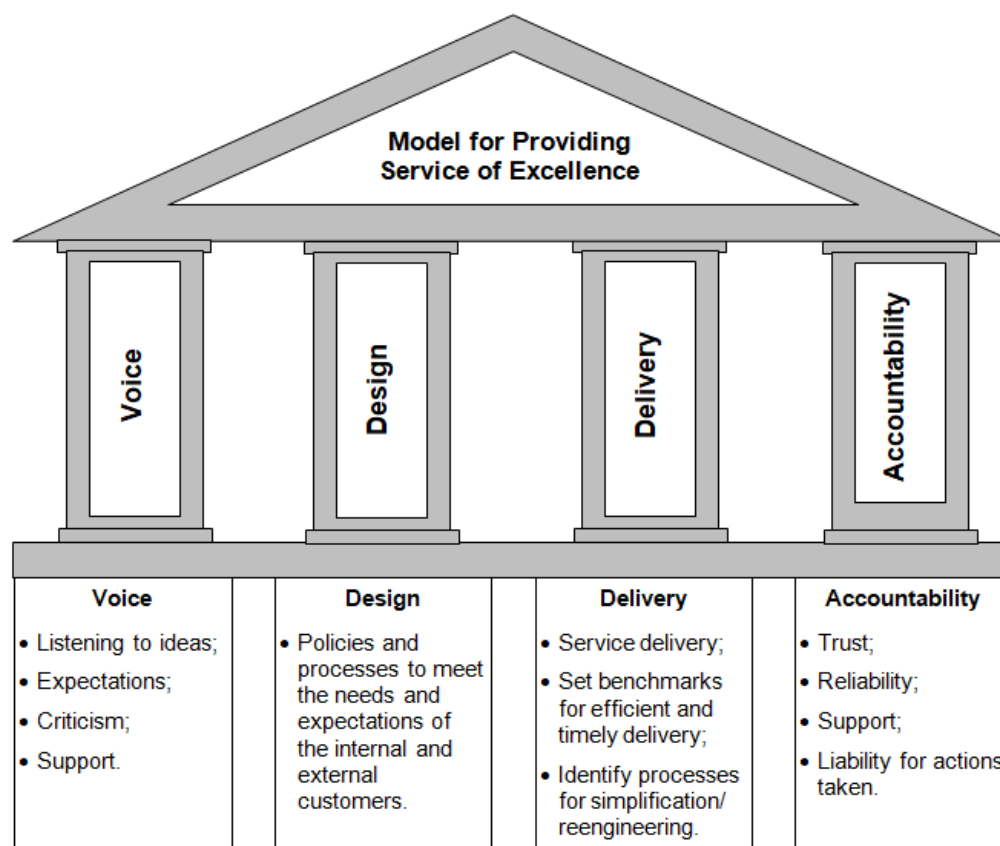
Similarly, many public service sites are following a production-oriented approach, whereby customers had to wait for a substantial amount of time in long queues to be provided with a requested service. To switch to a customer-driven approach, the challenge in his opinion was to provide a sustainable 'Service of Excellence', through enhancing the Public Service's standards of service delivery for the benefit of the individual citizen and members of civil society, as well as providing a fast-track service to the business community.

Laying the ground for mystery shopping

Before the Mystery Shopper project commenced, an extensive awareness campaign was launched to herald its introduction, funded internally, with ESF funds being specifically reserved for the project's operational aspects. The key objective was to stress the advantages of the Mystery Shopper project and more importantly secure the full commitment of all concerned, so that everyone collaborates in its implementation. This was achieved by holding forums and meetings with the management of line ministries and conducting seminars to explain the project scope and objectives. During these meetings, participants fielded questions that were answered, and a network was established to ease the communication flow.

As Head of the Public Service, the Principal Permanent Secretary initiated the project during the 'Public Service Week' in the presence of all public service employees, along with the four pillar model for Service of Excellence, where the principles of voice, design, delivery, and accountability were explained (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Four pillar model for providing service of excellence



Source: developed by the author.

The Mystery Shopper project was actively promoted through its inclusion in all the induction courses delivered to new recruits and recently engaged and promoted public service employees at the Institute for Public Services (IPS), to foster a culture of excellence among the hundreds of employees that have attended the various training courses. Officers from the Quality and Standards Directorate also conducted departmental service quality assessments at the public service sites that were targeted for eventual mystery shopping, providing management with hands-on experience of being tested on the standards of the service delivery at their departments. Furthermore, the webpage of the Quality and Standards Directorate featured all information connected to the mystery shopping exercise, to give full visibility to the envisaged benefits.

Critical analysis of mystery shopping as a change management tool

Clearly, mystery shopping is not the be-all-and-end-all tool that will resolve every reform concern within the Public Service. This is recognised by the actors involved, who acknowledge that, as a stand-alone tool, mystery shopping has several limitations and is not expected to give the ultimate picture of the service quality standard. Mystery shopping has been criticised at times for representing a singular experience, reflecting one particular interaction with employees at one location. Therefore, it is argued, it might not capture the entire customer journey through a specific event, such as establishing a company or a patient's medical treatment. Inevitably, mystery shopping also focuses on front-office practices, and thus back-office procedures and their latent weaknesses have to be extrapolated from the customer-

facing encounter. Moreover mystery shopping can be seen as a low data volume occurrence. Unlike surveys, online polls, or focus groups, mystery shopping is a one-person job, thus data volume may be low in that a singular shopper can only gather some degree of information. Therefore, unlike surveys, the response is not scalable, and unlike focus group discussions, it does not canvass a range of opinions. However, the Assistant Director, People and Standards Directorate countered these assertions and stated that this concern was overcome by increasing the number of mystery shopping interactions, and also by accessing the services in multiple methods (physical visits, email, telephone, online). Furthermore, he argued that the People and Standards Directorate kept in close and constant contact with the contractor undertaking the Mystery Shopping exercise to communicate the Directorate's vision. Moreover, mystery shopping was complemented by the departmental service quality instrument to provide a more complete assessment.

Mystery shopping may indicate how one type of customer 'shops', but does not reflect the opinion of all types of customers. However, this weakness may be turned into a strength, since the feedback received from the mystery shopper is what the normal customer is expecting, which may be different from what the Directorate thinks the customer is expecting. Nevertheless, the management team at the People and Standards Directorate contend that mystery shopping is considered as a valuable technique, particularly for testing and refining customer experience on a case-by-case basis and for comparing mystery shopping results with those of an ideal customer profile. They view it as a worthwhile instrument for competitor analysis regarding services, policies and locations. For instance, the various medical centres may be viewed as competing with one another. Thus, competitor analysis may be assessed by comparing the quality of services given by the various medical centres, social service centres and job vacancies centres to establish best practices.

The management team at the People and Standards Directorate considered all of the above factor, particularly the limitations, and sought a method that minimised the concerns and maximised the usefulness of the mystery shopping tool. Therefore, they ensured that the project and its associated processes, in the context of how it is applied in the Maltese Public Service, were not restricted to just mimicking a customer to measure the quality of service or compliance with regulation, or to gather specific information about products and services. The mystery shopping exercise went beyond this narrow approach and therefore incorporated a number of important features, such as integrating the SERVQUAL instrument in the process to measure the quality of service.

SERVQUAL is a multi-dimensional research instrument and is expressly designed to capture consumer expectations and perceptions of a service along the five dimensions (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles) that are believed to represent service quality. The findings from the SERVQUAL instrument are transposed into specific action plans that include a list of recommendations to address shortfalls and, in some cases, lead to a full business process re-engineering (BPR) exercise of the particular function under examination.

Therefore, the mystery shopping exercise is not a standalone assignment, but acts as a full change management life cycle, which launches a domino effect towards the vision of a service of excellence - from studying a service, measuring its suitability through SERVQUAL, providing recommendations, leading to a BPR process or a training programme, and ending with a full change management process for a particular service or function. According to the Permanent Secretary, Joyce Cassar, the results achieved are primarily derived from the implementation of the proposals made for service quality improvements that are resolved or being resolved by the departments and entities, which were subject to mystery shopping.

Mystery shopping is performed on areas that are perceived as compromising the standard of service delivery. Hence, the focus has been on managing the interaction with current and

potential customers to improve relationships with them, specifically concentrating on customer trust and reliability of the service and eventually encouraging more customers to use a particular service. This is achieved through streamlining the process, reducing service waiting times, and strengthening front and back office services. Mystery shopping is still underway, since several mystery shopping exercises have either not yet started or are currently ongoing. Thus, the overall assessment of its success and the extent of it can be determined at a later stage. However, based on the information available to date, it is evident that there are various instances where the process has successfully resulted in service delivery improvement following the mystery shopping exercise and the resulting improvement to the service delivery.

Design, execution and contribution of the ESF-funded projects

Main trigger for the current ESF-supported project

As well as the general drive to improve customer service, there were other programmes that prompted them to seek ESF funding for the Mystery Shopper project. For instance, in the Malta National Reform Programme, the Government had committed itself to addressing the Europe 2020 Strategy and Country Specific Recommendations that included 'ensuring long term sustainability of public finances'¹. Hence, through the Mystery Shopping concept, the aim of the Quality and Standards Directorate was to increase the efficiency of a number of government departments across the Public Administration, identify skills gaps and training needs of staff, and recommend process reengineering assignments where needed. The Assistant Director of the Quality and Standards Directorate maintains that the mystery shopping concept has and will continue to considerably reduce the costs per services offered by these departments. The concept is also seen to be applicable for the Malta National Reform Programme regarding the introduction of a public healthcare reform initiative to ensure 'the delivery of a cost-effective service and sustainable use of available resources'². It is noted that these reforms focus predominantly on the provision of services. Hence, based on this reform strategy, the Mystery Shopper project was viewed as commencing with an evaluation and assessment of the healthcare system, due to the impact this reform may have on the wellbeing of citizens.

The Mystery Shopper project has and will continue to assist specifically with these priorities. Moreover in the 'Human Resources and Skills Development Strategic Policy Framework: A way forward for 2014 – 2020', the Malta Public Service committed itself to addressing the needs of clients in a timely and qualitative manner³. This initiative recommended the Government appoint a Commissioner for Simplification and Reduction of Bureaucracy⁴. These initiatives were key triggers that prompted the management team at the Quality and Standards Directorate to seek ESF funding to implement the Mystery Shopper project. The above programmes are contenders for the project's continued application. It is argued that processes that are too complicated and timeframes for services that are too long have a negative impact on the lives of citizens. Hence, a key aim of the Mystery Shopper project is to identify processes that might benefit from simplification to reduce the delays that citizens may encounter in receiving a particular service. Moreover, efficient processes are also seen as reducing the financial burden on the Public Service Administration.

¹ MFIN. (2015). *Malta National Reform Programme 2015*. Available from: https://mfina.gov.mt/en/Library/Documents/NRP/nrp_2015_en.pdf. [Accessed 2 May 2019]; MFIN. (2016). *Malta National Reform Programme 2016*. Available from: <https://mfina.gov.mt/en/Library/Documents/NRP/NRP2016.pdf>. [Accessed 2 May 2019].

² MFIN, 2016, pp. 23.

³ OPM. (2014). *Human Resources and Skills Development Strategic Policy Framework: A way forward for 2014 - 2020*. Available from: <https://parlament.mt/media/79658/05933.pdf>. [Accessed 3 May 2019], pp. 4.

⁴ OPM, 2014 pp. 36.

Purpose and contribution of the ESF-Supported project and other design factors

Permanent Secretary Joyce Cassar recollected that: 'the Mystery Shopper project was considered to be a unique project in that the mystery shopping concept had never been applied in the Maltese Public Service, and therefore there was a degree of uncertainty regarding its applicability in the Maltese public sector environment.'

The project had three key objectives, namely:

1. To progressively upgrade the standards of public service delivery towards a sustainable Service of Excellence, where services increasingly become citizen-centric;
2. To identify and address processes that need to be simplified and improved to become more efficient and effective; and
3. To identify development/training needs of public officers acting as service providers.

The Mystery Shopper project was initially supported through national funds by an annual budget allocation. However, it was decided to expand the project by applying for ESF funding which was subsequently approved. The actual mystery shopping visits are being conducted by contracted companies that have been identified via the publication of a Framework Agreement as necessary and authorised by the Department of Contracts. These contracted companies provide reports and suggestions based on the findings of the mystery shopping visits. Hence, the Directorate extracts the key issues and recommendations from these reports, and sends them directly to the respective Public Administration departments for action. Follow-up visits to determine the action taken are carried out by the contracted companies.

Outsourcing the mystery shopping concept was viewed as the most effective and equitable manner of achieving the established goals, because it gave the Public Service access to expertise that it does not have, and the concept provides extensive first-hand information about the current service delivery position, which in turn helps the Public Service to plan a way forward. Back-offices of front-facing units are being indirectly assessed and referred for a business process reengineering exercise if deemed necessary. At this stage, the major stakeholders in the mystery shopping project are the various Ministries whose departments have a customer-facing function, and hence have a direct interaction with the citizen. Thus, they are being mystery shopped with a view of maximising the enhancement of service delivery quality.

Because the Mystery Shopper project is designed around the SERVQUAL measurement tool, the respective services are being gauged against 10 quality determinants. Namely:

1. Access - assessed by the ease and convenience of accessing the service;
2. Communication - measured by the degree to which users were kept informed and the extent that users were listened to;
3. Competence - appraised by the skills and knowledge required to provide the service/s;
4. Courtesy - measured by the level of politeness, respect, consideration, and friendliness shown to the customer by the staff at all levels;
5. Credibility - gauged by the degree of trustworthiness, reputation and image shown to by the mystery shopper;
6. Reliability - assessed by the provision of consistent, accurate and dependable services;
7. Responsiveness - assessed by the willingness and readiness to provide services when needed;

8. Security - appraised by the degree of physical safety, financial security, and confidentiality in the provision of the service;
9. Tangibles - assessed by the physical aspects of the service related to the equipment, facilities, and resources utilised in providing the service;
10. Understanding the customer - measured by the degree to which the service provider identifies the individual customer's needs.

The role of the mystery shopper is to: test the targeted public service sites; report the findings on each of the determinants; rate the service they are accessing; and recommend methods for improvement according to pre-set specifications, including business process reengineering. Hence, the full life cycle of the functional process is taken into consideration. Furthermore the mystery shoppers' reports that are compiled by the contractor are thoroughly analysed by the staff at the Quality and Standards Directorate and utilised as the basis for specific recommendations for improvements design in the form of Action Plans, which in turn are proposed to the management of the service site/office that was mystery shopped. This involves continuous collaboration with ministries and other entities within the public sector whose services are targeted for improvement and who are viewed as strategic partners in the project. Major proposals include: reengineering protracted processes; providing adequate customer care training to all citizen-contact public officers; and simplifying access to services, including physical access, online/social media access, as well as mServices (E-services through mobile phones).

The above illustrates that the Quality and Standards Directorate encountered a number of key issues, namely obtaining sufficient funds to ensure that the mystery shopping project is sustainable, using proper proven instruments, and outsourcing the process to an entity that had the expertise. It is argued that these key issues were adequately addressed by: seeking ESF funds to ensure the necessary long-term support for the project's financial sustainability, which had a life span of five years; selecting the SERVQUAL measurement tool as part of mystery shopping; and awarding a contract to an expert entity in the field that had the responsibility for the full reporting cycle, including business process reengineering where applicable to simplify the service delivery process.

The mystery shopping exercise and its intention to achieve Service of Excellence should not be viewed as a one-off exercise. This will be achieved by implementing a mechanism that regularly reviews processes with the aim of streamlining procedures and therefore speeding up service delivery on a progressive basis. It is important to identify the training and development needs of public officers and public sector employees, in order to upgrade customer service delivery, particularly providing the necessary training for the benefit of first-contact officers in their line of duty, and ensuring a people development approach.

The interviews and supporting documents reveal that the mystery shopping concept assists line ministries and other public sector entities in measuring the quality and standards of their public service delivery with a view for further improvement by, first, identifying customer service deficiencies within their service delivery processes that need to be addressed, and second, upgrading the service delivery through qualitative recommendations for improvements. It is argued that the ESF financial support has made it possible to extend the project to the whole Public Service Administration rather than limiting it to small pockets of assessment. Hence, ESF financial support has made the Mystery Shopper project more sustainable.

Implementation of the ESF project: main developments

A comprehensive plan of action was defined to implement the Mystery Shopper project, based upon four fundamental project segments.

First, the Quality and Standards Directorate were nominated and authorised as the Project Coordinators, to establish a robust and motivated project team that defined and reviewed the project scope.

Second, in preparation for defining a communications strategy, the line ministries were generally informed about the project and were requested to provide the Project Coordinators with details of the departments/units that dealt directly with the general public on a daily basis. This facilitated the Project Coordinators to assess the magnitude of the mystery shopping exercise and enabled them to establish 176 main public service offices or sites (excluding their tributary outposts that also provide services to the public).

Third, once the public service offices were established, the Project Coordinators were able to formulate a comprehensive communications strategy that featured a Standards of Procedure (SOPs) template. This template, particularly its functionality, was explained to each line ministry. It was designed to gather accurate and explicit details regarding the description of the service, the customer profile, and documents required to access the service. The completed templates were collected from each of the 176 public service sites. This enabled the Project Coordinators to confirm and also review the overall footprint of the project in terms of the number of service sites involved; the Ministries they formed part of; and the services that were offered by them. These SOPs templates were also collected with a view to eventually help the mystery shopper contractor in undertaking the project. This process resulted in 650 Standards of Procedure templates being collected, which are being continuously monitored and updated.

Fourth, the Project Coordinators commenced the procurement process for outsourcing the services of mystery shopping through an open procurement procedure. The procurement process resulted in defining a Framework Agreement structured into a number of lots, signifying areas to be mystery shopped with a view to improve service delivery regarding: culture and leisure; education, science and technology; health and community care; environment, energy, and agriculture/fisheries; social welfare, equality and social inclusion; transport and communication; work and employment services; tax and finance; economy, business and trade; and citizenship, immigration and identity. In a following step, each mystery shopper had the function of measuring the service delivery through 10 service quality determinants of the SERVQUAL model and provide a report with concrete recommendations to the Quality and Standards Directorate for further action and follow-up with the respective line ministries concerned.

The contracting of consultants to carry out the project presented major issues regarding: (a) the procurement method to be adopted; (b) the assessment of expertise of the experts proposed by the contractor; (c) how to manage interviewer bias; and (d) the best way to implement recommendations that would be put forward following the assessment undertaken.

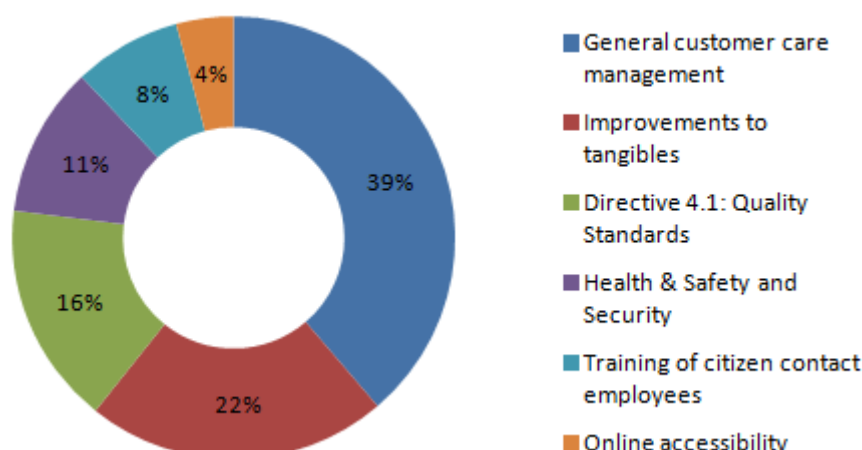
The first contracts awarded for the provision of mystery shopping involved health, and the finance and tax sectors. In a later stage the mystery shopping project was extended to cover the regional public services offered in Gozo, the work and employment sector, the economic business and trade sector, and the social welfare, equality and social inclusion sector. Mystery shopping exercises for the additional sectors were undertaken in 2018 and 2019 respectively, with the applicable process of monthly reporting and drawing up of Action Plans ensued. To ensure better project control, a mid-monthly report has been introduced in addition to the monthly report, thus allowing the Project Coordinators to take earlier action when required. To date, mystery shopping visits to 51 public service sites in the areas of health, tax and finance, social security, and regional services in Gozo have been undertaken, with 191 recommendations being implemented.

It is argued that tangible evidence of the benefits from mystery shopping is derived from the number of recommendations for service quality improvements that are being resolved by the departments/entities that have been mystery shopped. For instance, there has been a leap in the quality of the services being offered due to the implementation of the recommendations from mystery shopping exercises at the Inland Revenue Department, Business First and other sectors. The whole service delivery concept at these entities has been observed to be transformed from one of shabbiness, confusion and general disorder to one of having a pleasant physical environment with a modern setting and furnishings, orderly service counters with courteous staff, and supported by congenial, well informed and knowledgeable staff that advise and serve the various customers, ranging from the individual citizen, self-employed persons and the business community. This is also confirmed by the CEO of Servizz.gov who pointed out that all processes at locations where Servizz.gov have been put into operation have been completely reengineered due to the recommendations from the Mystery Shopper exercises.

Direct observation illustrates that Business First offers more opportunities for government departments and other bodies to provide their services directly from its offices in order to cut down on excessive red-tape in obtaining information and carrying out the required procedures to set up and run a business. It is claimed that through the continuous effort of updating paper-based forms into electronic services, Business First are providing real-time services to businesses throughout their setting up phases and are provided with continuous support. Another example is where the local public hospital (Mater Dei) has reengineered its patient appointments system so that patients are reminded of their appointment by SMS one week beforehand, and this message is followed up two days later with another SMS reminder. It is argued that nowhere in the EU or around the world that has a national health scheme is a patient reminded of their appointment in such an effective manner.

The Director of the Quality and Standards Directorate pointed out that many recommendations have been implemented involving various categories, namely: general customer care management; training for citizen contact individuals; quality standards⁵; suggested improvements for online accessibility of the service; improvements to health and safety, and security aspects; and improvements to tangibles. The degree to which the various categories have been covered by the Mystery Shopper project is shown at Figure 2, which shows main focus is general customer care management (39%), followed by improvements to tangibles (22%) and quality standards (16%), together accounting for more than three-quarters of all the resolved recommendations. These three categories are considered essential for the success of the Mystery Shopper project. The Director, Quality and Standards Directorate, claims that an important benefit resulting from the project is that it includes the dissemination of service delivery standards to the public, particularly the level of service that is expected from public service employees. He maintains that the outcome of this dissemination is the focus and vigilance of line ministries regarding service delivery, particularly through the simplification of burdensome processes that aim at providing a better and convenient service to the customer. An important outcome of the project includes the improvement in service delivery through increased attention by service sites to the customer care culture that was originally targeted for urgent upgrading. The project contributes towards a sustainable Service of Excellence and has generated substantial interest among stakeholders, who are attracted by the effective results of the project.

⁵ Directive No. 4-1. (2017). Standards for service of excellence offered by the Public Administration to the public and to public employees. Available from: <https://publicservice.gov.mt/en/people/Documents/Directives/Directive-4-1.pdf>. [Accessed 29 April 2019].

Figure 2. Implemented recommendations by category of assignments undertaken

Conclusion: results, lessons learnt and role of ESF financial support

Collectively, the mystery shopping assignments are aimed at contributing towards providing a Service of Excellence throughout the Public Service. Hence, the Mystery Shopper project may be viewed as a key component of the Government's strategy to bring the Public Service Administration into a closer relationship with the individual citizen, members of civil society, and the business community, thus bridging the gap between those that serve and those that are the recipients of the resultant service. Moreover, the Mystery Shopper project cannot be viewed in isolation - it is the result and outcome of a concerted effort at reforming Public Service Administration. Therefore, the catalyst that acted as the driving thrust for the Mystery Shopper project was the growing contemporary societal needs for a customer care-oriented service, as a means to achieving a sustainable Service of Excellence.

Objective review and key results

Table 1 illustrates that the results achieved by the Mystery Shopper project to-date are extensive and cover a wide spectrum of sectors. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that the aim of the enhancements from mystery shopping is quality in terms of excellent service. General customer care is highlighted to be the emphasis of the Mystery Shopper project. However, the project must be viewed as ongoing and has a span of five years. Therefore, the results shown reflect only the starting phase of the project (less than two years). It is argued that this project has provided other benefits, such as the diffusion of the standards of public service delivery expected from public service staff. Hence, the mystery shopping assignments are establishing benchmarks by which customer care and service are being measured and by which the line ministries and their respective departments are being assessed. This contention is supported by the Director, Quality and Standards Directorate who claims that as a result of the mystery shopping exercises, line ministries have stepped up their vigilance towards service delivery, while cumbersome processes are being simplified for the better convenience of the customer, leading to a more cost-effective service as a by-product. Perhaps the key effect of the Mystery Shopper project has been that it has acted as a signpost indicating a major change is needed in the way the Public Service needs to conduct its business and improve its relationship with its customers.

TABLE 1. Details of implemented recommendation from the Mystery Shopper project by category

Category	Recommendation resolved
General customer care	Simplifying processes for the convenience of the general public; Improving service delivery through reducing waiting times; Strengthening front-office services; Upgrading the appointment system and queue management, enhancing customer experience at the reception and service delivery desks; Creating a serene atmosphere at the waiting area by enhancing queue management; Enhancing privacy and confidentiality; Understanding customer needs and listening to the customer.
Customer care training and Directive 4.1	Strengthening the prowess of customer care staff and service delivery citizen contact employees; Training on achieving a service of excellence.
Online access to the services	Inclusion of essential information to be rendered on the service's relevant webpage: full narrative of the service, an FAQs feature, location details and contact details, increasing social media presence, as well as the provision of e-forms allowing citizens to apply for the service online.
Security, and Health and Safety	Creation of a safe and secure customer area, with general cleanliness, availability of restrooms, respect to privacy, and provision of adequate privacy during and after service delivery; Awareness and training of data protection and GDPR principles.
Tangibles	Upgrading building housing services, mainly its access to persons with disabilities, owning a smart and tidy interior that works for customer convenience, and providing proper internal and external signage to ease physical access.

Generally, it may be concluded that the main drivers for success were the vision of the project and the flexibility in implementing it. The project vision is based on the four pillars of service of excellence on which the public administration wants to develop its service provision. This is supported by Directive 4-1 that provides practical rules to follow in the delivery of service, and the 10 departmental standards of the SERVQUAL model, which are applied to all departments/entities to ensure a harmonised approach towards their assessment. The flexibility in implementing this vision was essential since the public service administration involves departments/entities of multiple natures and they all have their own customers and needs. Being flexible, the project can be effective across the public administration without losing the guiding light of its vision. The data examined suggests that the project has been a success in view of the number of entities that have already been mystery shopped and the recommendations that have been implemented. Nevertheless, the project will continue to be implemented within the initiatives mentioned previously and any future initiatives that may be undertaken by the public service administration will take into account the mystery shopping exercise recommendations. However, the Directorate for Quality and Standards needs to be further strengthened with human resources and a commitment that national funds will continue to be allocated after the ESF project, in order to ensure sustainability.

Lessons learnt

Mystery shopping in isolation does not provide long-term benefits. However, incorporating the SERVQUAL model, leading to process reengineering for particular functional areas, is viewed as providing maximum value. In addition, experience in implementing this project has shown that there is significant benefit from instilling a culture of ongoing improvement with a view to enhancing customer experience in the short term, and the organisation brand/image in the long term. The Mystery Shopper project has illustrated that, for a project to be successful, it must have the support and commitment from the top levels of the organisational hierarchy. In this case, the mystery shopping project was supported by the Prime Minister and the Principal Permanent Secretary, and this support cascaded through the Public Service hierarchy. This commitment is particularly reinforced when the project is aligned with the strategic direction of government regarding public service administration reform. It is also argued that having a sufficiently detailed project scope that defines in unambiguous terms the project parameters and what needs to be accomplished is essential, because the project scope becomes the fundamental basis for any contract with third parties involved in the project's implementation.

This implementation is highly dependent on having the proper structure for project organisation and the respective formation of the project team. The Mystery Shopper project was the primary domain of the Quality and Standards Directorate that had a direct link to the Permanent Secretary, People and Standards, for escalating issues that could not be resolved at the Directorate level, either because it was not part of their mandate or the particular issue required a higher decision-making authority. Moreover, the project team consisted of individuals who had an appropriate mix of expertise, thus generating the necessary synergy that propelled the project implementation process forward. The interviews and supporting documents suggest that investing the appropriate effort in planning the project in sufficient detail was a critical success factor. The planning effort is seen as forming a robust basis for project control in the implementation phase and acts as a fundamental baseline for formulating a comprehensive communication strategy that addresses project stakeholders. Hence, planning cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be supplemented by project control and having a communications process that involves all project stakeholders.

Additionally, project planning is theory, while project control during implementation is reality. It is essential for the Mystery Shopper project to be regularly monitored by conducting project review meetings and having a robust reporting system that provided the appropriate feedback from the Project Team, including the Contractor who acted as the Mystery Shopper. The proposals and follow-up actions from the mystery shopper were vital for the success of the project. It is contended that the concept of Excellence of Service needed to be repeated and stressed at all times to ensure a culture change, where a customer-centric orientation is viewed as the norm. Increasing the professionalism of customer service employees contributes towards developing their individual motivation and job satisfaction, leading to a happier service rendition where the public can be better served. This is perceived to be the added value that a mystery shopping exercise can provide to any organisation that ventures to engage in such a process. Generally, it may be concluded that the project team has increased its experience in mystery shopping, and monitoring the implementation of recommendations. Thus, it has gradually become more effective in monitoring the quality of service being provided by the public service administration, as well as increasing its knowledge of the structures and services offered by the various departments and entities.

Contribution and role of ESF support

This project is part-financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020. The overall budget of EUR 2,150,000, of which EUR 1,725,000 was funded through ESF, is spread over the whole duration of the project and is divided between the different areas of

work being targeted. Most of this budget is allocated to the primary activity, principally in relation to the outsourcing of mystery shopping exercises. These contracts include funding for the resources that the mystery shopping contractors require to conduct the exercise, analysing, and presenting the findings of the mystery shopping exercises. The Quality and Standards Directorate is the project owner and is responsible for the procurement and administrative processes related to the mystery shopping contracts. In managing the project, the Director Quality and Standards (project leader) is supported by a team of two first line managers to ensure that the project is executed as smoothly as possible. This includes, managing the procurement processes, keeping records, and processing payments, together with replying to any queries from the Managing Authority. Regular meetings are held internally to assess the process, share ideas and review suggestions to ensure the smooth running of the project. The ESF project supports all the above processes. The ESF project is supported by eight employees from the Quality and Standards Directorate that have been assigned to the project. Moreover, the ESF project complements the national funds that are allocated yearly to the project, thus ensuring that any unscheduled requests for mystery shopping exercises can be satisfied without disturbing the disbursement schedule.

The ESF-funded mystery shopping initiative has become a key feature in the organisational mindset of the Public Service Administration and its employees. This is a consequence of direct experience, exposure during training, and the Quality and Standards Directorate's efforts and website. The concept is progressively gaining more momentum and acceptance and is becoming part of the day-to-day business of the Public Service Administration. While the priority of the Mystery Shopper project is to conduct exercises in all client-facing departments or entities within the Public Service Administration, repeat exercises are also envisaged. This will ensure that continuous improvements are made following implementation of the resultant recommendations from mystery shopping exercises. This ESF project is also supporting (together with the various processes) the implementation of the Quality Label scheme whereby entities are awarded points based on objective criteria that will recognise their achievement as having reached the Service of Excellence quality level. Thus, the mystery shopping initiative is now embedded in the monitoring of service quality, and is a key tool for improving the overall quality of service provided by the Public Service Administration in a multi-year programme. It has been observed that on a financial level, the Public Service Administration has been allocating national funds to the mystery shopping initiative yearly to ensure its sustainability beyond the ESF funding. However, the Quality and Standards Directorate needs to strengthen its resources further to work more efficiently and effectively in future activities. Generally, it may be concluded that ESF support was crucial in financially assisting to effectively kick-start the Mystery Shopper project. ESF support has bestowed vital assistance to the implementation team to define and structure its procedural methodology, including the reporting, monitoring and data management systems. ESF funds have supported the mystery shopper project in not only gaining recognition on a national front, but also on a European level.

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