



State Comptroller of Israel | Local Government Audit | 2021

Systemic Audit

Online Services of Local Authorities in Routine and Emergencies



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Background

In the last decade, public authorities have placed the service challenge and customer experience at a high priority, and are expending efforts in improving service by a variety of means, including through technology. This issue is of great importance in crisis and times of emergency, during which the local authority must continue to provide services to customers, even in the reality of social distancing, as results at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This reality poses many challenges to local authorities both routinely and in times of emergency. Despite the achievements and extensive knowledge accumulated in some local authorities in the digital field, from a national viewpoint there are considerable gaps between the local authorities. Furthermore, alongside the many advantages of using digital channels to provide online services to a variety of consumers, this use involves risks that require deliberate preparation.



Key figures

49%

The rate of Internet use in the (Jewish) ultra-Orthodox population compared to 92% in the general Jewish population and 85% in the Arab population, as of 2016. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in the rate of Internet use by the ultra-Orthodox population. As of 2020, a survey has revealed that 76% of this population has an internet connection¹.

62%

The percentage of users who make payments and shorten queues from among Internet users in the Arab population, compared to 89% in the general population, as of 2020².

20 times, 50 times

The cost of performing an action over the phone and the cost of performing an action physically in front of a representative, respectively, compared to performing the same action digitally.

**44
local authorities**

Received a digitization score lower than 41 (out of 100) in a mapping conducted by the Ministry of Interior during 2020 among 174 local authorities.

**NIS 297
million**

The budget required to close the digital gap in the 174 local authorities mapped by the Ministry of Interior.

**110
local authorities**

Out of 255 local authorities³ are located at the two lowest digital levels according to the "Digilocally" Index⁴ for 2020.

1 According to the data of the Israel Internet Association.

2 According to the data of the Israel Internet Association.

3 Except for the two industrial-local authorities Neot Hovav and Migdal Tefen.

4 An index of digital services in local authorities developed by the consulting and accounting firm A. The data on which the index is based were collected from the websites and Facebook pages of all local authorities (except the industrial councils). In weighting the data, different levels of importance are given to the types of online services: digital services per resident (50%); business digital services (25%); digital planning and engineering services (12.5%); accessibility of digital platforms (12.5%).



Audit actions



From July to November 2020, the Office of the State Comptroller examined the issue of online services in local authorities in routine times and in times of emergency (test case: the "COVID-19 pandemic"). Within this examination, the gap in the content of online services offered by local authorities to users was examined, and the issue was examined in depth in six local authorities: **Elad, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva**. The in-depth audit examined these issues: the scope and quality of online services; the process of developing and operating online services and diversification of digital responses; information security and privacy protection; online services in times of emergency. Completion examinations and requests for clarification were made in various central government bodies.

Key findings



Scope of Online Services in Local Authorities – Information published by various sources, including the Ministry of Interior, shows that there is great variance between local authorities in Israel in the scope of online services they offer to consumers for services and information they publish for the public, as well as in resources – budget and manpower – they invest in the field. As for the scope of online services, for example, only 37% of the local authorities allow an online request for a property tax discount, 24% of the local authorities allow an application for a change in holders regarding property tax, 8% of the local authorities offer a chat with a service representative, 9% allow scheduling a frontal appointment, 10% allow the payment of a business license fee, and only 2% of the local authorities allow the status of an application for placing signs to be checked online⁵. Disparities were found in the average rating received by local authorities in indices by type of local authority and district. For example, the average rating of all the local authorities surveyed in the "Digilocally" index was 46 (out of 100), the rating of the local councils was 36 and of the municipalities – 58. The average rating of the local authorities in the Northern District was 36 compared to the average rating of the local authorities of the Central and Tel Aviv districts, which stood at 58, which is about 60% higher.



Quality of Online Services – The local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon, Nazareth and Tel Sheva** offer online services that are not uniform, are not accessible and available to customers in an easy and simple manner, and do not include feedback to update the user. In these local authorities, the services have been developed without seeing

⁵ Data for 2020 from the "Digilocally" index, relating to 255 local authorities.



“customer journeys”⁶ and there is no continuity of process in many processes they offer, which makes it difficult for the consumer to use the services and navigate between the digital channels they offer. After completion of the audit, the municipalities of **Elad and Nazareth** developed new websites with a response to the user interface. The local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** do not maintain a mechanized and structured mechanism for measuring the level of service in the urban digital space.



Online Services Development Process – Over the years, the local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** have developed a variety of online services offered in various channels, such as websites and applications, without conducting a thinking and decision-making process based on systematic data collection, and without preparing a master plan or a multi-year or annual work plan for the development of services that will serve as a basis for their activities in this field or address the budgetary aspect. The local authorities of Elad, Ashkelon, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva did not conduct frequent procedures to measure the extent of use of existing online services, process the data and raw conclusions for improving and upgrading online services, nor did they conduct surveys to measure consumer satisfaction with the services and their quality. **All the local authorities** examined did not conduct a public participation procedure to examine the needs of residents and businesses for the purpose of setting goals for the development of new online services.



Diversification of Digital Responses and their Accessibility to Customers – The local authorities of **Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** have not developed a variety of digital responses for online services consumption, especially those tailored to consumers with a partial technology orientation or limited exposure to infrastructure – such as online information and service stations, information assistants helping with the use of online services and voice messaging service. The **Nazareth and Tel Sheva** local authorities did not act to make the services accessible through information and guidance to all consumers, especially to target audiences who, up to the end of the audit, made limited use of these services. Deficiencies were found on the websites of the local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** in complying with the requirements of the Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities (Service Accessibility Adjustments) Regulations, 2013 (the Service Accessibility Regulations).





Digital Service Level Agreement – The local authorities examined – **Elad, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** – do not have a declaration or service level agreement on digital issues in all the digital channels they operate, that reflect to the customer the digital service indices he should expect. In addition, these local authorities do not maintain a mechanized and structured mechanism for measuring the level of service in the urban digital space; on the user's (customer's) part, this is reflected by a lack of clarity about the level of service and


⁶ Part of a business model aimed at building a relationship with “potential customers” and maintaining or promoting the relationship with existing customers.



timeframes for completing the process and applications submitted, and on the local authority's part it is apparent that it has no tools and capabilities to monitor, follow-up and control the level of digital service and to produce continuous and significant improvement in the field.

 **Information Security** – Local authorities deal with the challenges and risks inherent in cyber and information security incidents, each according to its capabilities and awareness of the importance of the issue, and therefore they are not equally prepared to deal with such incidents. Deficiencies in the field of information security and protection of privacy were found in the local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva**.

 **Online Services in Times of Emergency** – There is no regulated outline that includes professional guidelines for setting up and operating digital platforms that will allow local authorities to provide essential services in times of emergency through online means.

 **Integrating Entity** – The local authorities do not have an integrating and guiding professional entity in the digital field and in the field of information and cyber security, which has an impact on the scope and quality of the services that the local authorities offer to the residents.



Reducing Gaps – During 2020, the Ministry of Interior took steps to map the gaps between local authorities in the digital field, including collecting data from them and promoting a program to reduce these gaps, and participation in additional programs to train dedicated staff in local authorities to address their needs in this field.

Online Services During the COVID-19 pandemic – Local authorities, the Israel Home Front Command, the Ministry of Interior, the Digital Israel Headquarters, and the Federation of Local Authorities in Israel worked to promote the development and accessibility of new online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and even developed new digital channels for this purpose, such as an authority emergency portal that serves as an alternative website to the local authority emergency site; "National Initiative 265 for the Development and Sharing of Knowledge for the Promotion of Digitization in Local Authorities", which aims to expand digital services and make them accessible to local authority residents as well as reduce gaps between local authorities through digital tools. The local authorities of **Elad, Ashkelon and Jerusalem** developed a variety of new online services and digital channels during this period.

Key recommendations



It is recommended that those involved in the digital field in local government, the Ministries of Interior and of Digital Affairs, complete their activities to integrate the areas of digitization and teleprocessing in local authorities and determine the identity of the



central professional and guiding body for the local authorities in these matters. The Ministry of Interior must continue its efforts to map the gaps between local authorities in the digital field, and to promote a plan to reduce these gaps in order to improve the digital field in local authorities, including the field of online services.



It is recommended that local authorities expand the range of online services and diversify the digital responses and adapt them to the various service consumers, and act to ensure that online services will be uniform, accessible and available to customers in an easy and simple manner, and include feedback to update the user. In this context, it is appropriate that they conduct an orderly procedure of preparing work plans for the development of online services, which will be based on a long-term vision and will address the required resources, after considering the needs among the various service consumers.



Local authorities should establish Service level agreements (SLA), including in the field of digital service, publish them on their websites, and establish measurement and evaluation mechanisms for examining their compliance with these level agreements, and initiate steps to continually improve customer service and experience.



All local authorities, and in particular the local authorities examined – **Elad, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Sdot Dan and Tel Sheva** – must take the necessary actions to meet the requirements of the website Service Accessibility Regulations and the Privacy Protection (Information Security) Regulations, 2017, and rectify the deficiencies raised in these areas.



It is recommended that local authorities continue their efforts to upgrade and make services accessible to consumers of all kinds during the COVID-19 pandemic, improve the service experience of residents in times of emergency, and close gaps in places that still require it, and preserve the capabilities developed for routine times.



Major Challenges in the Digital Field in Local Government



Gap between local authorities

Difference in prioritizing the assimilation of advanced technologies



Lack of a guiding professional entity



Gap in expectations

given the gap in residents' experiences in the use of services in the various sectors



Lack of standardization for (advanced) technological processes and tools



The absence of appropriate human capital

Lack of professional manpower with knowledge and skill in the digital field



Deficient budget allocation

Summary

The use of digital channels and the provision of services by online means contribute to improving the service to the public and the efficiency of work processes, and enable the local authority to be available and provide the public with an efficient service at a relatively low cost. This becomes even more important in times of crisis and emergency. Although some local authorities have gained knowledge in the field and developed a wide range of online services offered in diverse digital channels, some offer a very limited range of services, in channels that are not always tailored to the needs of all customers, which impairs consumers' access to the services and efficient use of them. This matter becomes even more acute in light of the fact that local authorities have no central and integrated professional entity in this field. It is appropriate that the central government and the local authorities work to reduce the aforementioned gaps and to improve the level of information and communication



technology in the local authorities and the scope and quality of the online services they offer to the residents. Within these actions, it is proposed to work to improve the user experience and make the services accessible to all customers in a variety of digital channels, while ensuring compliance with the accessibility requirements in accordance with the Service Accessibility Regulations and protecting users' privacy.