



Highlights of Special Report The Office of the Ombudsman

November 2024

Public Service in Public Bodies





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Opening Remarks of the Ombudsman and the Head of the Office of the Ombudsman

This booklet presents the highlights of the special report on public service in public bodies.

By virtue of its authority, the Office of the Ombudsman serves as a recourse for people in their interactions with the various authorities, to protect their rights and exercise their right to receive appropriate public service. In accordance with the provisions of Chapter Seven of State Comptroller Law, 5718-1958 [Consolidated Version], the Office of the Ombudsman investigates complaints against hundreds of governmental authorities and public bodies, and in recent years has received some 20,000 complaints per year.

About a third of the complaints investigated by the Office of the Ombudsman each year concern the service provided by public bodies, including the manner in which the service is delivered and the tools for providing it.

The special report addresses the topic of public service delivered by public bodies. The importance of the report derives not only from the many complaints received on this issue, but also from the relevance of public service to all the bodies interacting with the public, regardless of their fields of activity. The expectation that public service will be provided fairly and appropriately, in a manner that conforms to norms of proper public administration and by reasonable and respectful means, traverses different fields and concerns all public service providers. Failings in the provision of service, even if they are not at the core of the service, are likely to constitute one of the main barriers to rights take-up, especially by more vulnerable sectors of society.

Since the Office of the Ombudsman annually investigates thousands of complaints about public service, it has a unique perspective on the subject and serves as a focal-point for knowledge relating to it.

The report enumerates a list of some 100 benchmarks for appropriate public service that arose from the investigation of 34,259 complaints by the Office of the Ombudsman from 2019 to March 2024. These benchmarks, which address various matters, generate a "road map" for every public body, for the improvement of the service that it delivers to the public. The creation of mechanisms for providing effective and reasoned responses, the shortening of time frames for handling inquiries, the coordination between different governmental sources and the exchange of information among them - all these will serve to streamline public service, reduce governmental expenditure entailed in the provision of service and increase public trust in the public systems.

As is reflected in the report, we believe that the public service user receives the service by merit, not grace, and that the service provider must as far as possible tailor the manner of providing the service to the needs of the service user, and make receiving the service easier.

Our scriptures prescribe, 'Let your friend's honor be as dear to you as your own' (Mishnah, Avot

2:10). Accordingly, public service providers should provide the same respectful, high-quality and efficient service that they would wish to receive themselves.

To complement the benchmarks arising from the investigation of the complaints reaching the Office of the Ombudsman, in February to March 2024 the staff of the Office conducted a survey vis-à-vis eight selected bodies to assess the service provided for the public at the service centers of these bodies, on their websites and by their call centers. The purpose of this was to enable the public bodies to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in the provision of service, in relation to other bodies as well, and to improve the service accordingly. The survey includes recommendations for improving the service, in accordance with the findings.

The war that has been imposed on Israel over the last year has highlighted an additional aspect of public service - public service in times of emergency. As said, the service survey was conducted in February - March 2024, at the height of the "Swords of Iron" war, while tens of thousands of people were displaced from their

homes and in need of efficient public service to assist them in their special circumstances. The competence of the public sector to provide the public with appropriate service during these times increases national resilience and the ability of society and individuals to cope with the difficulties of the times.

The complaints received by the Office of the Ombudsman regarding the difficulties encountered by the public in receiving services during the first weeks of the "Swords of Iron" war were described in detail in a previous special report¹.

The failings disclosed during the first period of the war and the justified expectation of the public that public bodies assist them in times of crisis too, emphasize the need for all bodies to join forces in establishing a stable scheme for the provision of public service, not only in normal times but in times of emergency as well.

The Office of the Ombudsman invites the public to continue seeking its assistance in every case of inappropriate public service from public bodies, in order to aid the Office and public bodies in improving the quality of service delivered to the public.



Matanyahu Englman
State Comptroller and Ombudsman



Dr. Esther Ben-Haim, Adv.
Head of the Office of the Ombudsman

November 2024

1 The Ombudsman, Special Report - Public Complaints during First Weeks of 'Swords of Iron' War (2023), <https://www.mevaker.gov.il/sites/DigitalLibrary/Pages/Reports/7688-1.aspx>

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Preface

Every year the Office of the Ombudsman investigates thousands of complaints against hundreds of governmental authorities and public bodies, by virtue of its mandate. In recent years, the number of complaints reaching the Office has totaled some 20,000 a year. From 2019 to 2023, the number of complaints investigated by the Office increased by 57%.

About a third of the complaints investigated by the Office of the Ombudsman relate to public service, that is to say the manner in which public bodies provide services for the public.

During the period under review - from January 2019 to March 2024 - 34,538 complaints about public service were filed with the Office of the Ombudsman; of these, the Office was authorized to investigate 32,538, which comprise 31.6% of the total number of complaints whose investigation was completed in the same period. With regard to the remainder of the complaints about public service, the investigation was terminated due to lack of authority to investigate them.

The special report presents some 100 benchmarks based on lessons learned from the investigation of complaints about public service during the period under review.

Public service is an extremely broad topic that covers a variety of professional and administrative fields. The expectation that the service will be provided fairly and appropriately, in ways that meet the norms of proper public administration, traverses different fields and concerns all public service providers. The service users expect to receive an answer within a reasonable period of time; they expect just and respectful conduct on the part of the service provider, as well as relevant and professional consideration of their application, whatever the service.

The Office of the Ombudsman within the Office of the State Comptroller considers itself a "professional home" for all those handling public inquiries and complaints in the public bodies, and strives to improve and enhance the service provided for the public by public bodies,

including by means of this special report.

The benchmarks formulated upon the investigation of complaints can assist public bodies, including in coping with a mass of inquiries and with a lack of manpower, and establishing new service processes.

Furthermore, the special report contains general data relating to the various subjects of complaints in the sphere of public service, to the public bodies against which the complaints were filed and to the results of the investigation of the complaints.

To complement the report, the perspective of the service users themselves is also presented. For the first time, the Office of the Ombudsman, with the assistance of a statistician, examined various aspects of public service in public bodies against which many complaints are received on different issues, and which operate service centers across the country, as well as call centers and websites. From February to March 2024, Office of the Ombudsman personnel visited the nationwide reception centers of the following eight public bodies: the National Insurance Institute (NII), the Israel Tax Authority (Tax Authority), the Population and Immigration Authority (Population Authority), the Ministry of Transport and Road Safety (Ministry of Transport), the Israel Land Authority, the New Amidar Company (Amidar), the Israel Postal Company Ltd. (Israel Post) and the Israel Electric Corporation Ltd. (Electric Corporation). In addition, Office of the Ombudsman personnel checked the service provided by the call centers and websites of these bodies. The findings are analyzed in the report, thereby complementing the insights gathered from the investigation of complaints about public service.

The war that has been forced upon Israel over the last year has spotlighted an additional aspect of public service: public service in times of emergency, which is possibly more important than public service in regular times. The competence of the public sector to provide appropriate service for the public during these times enhances national resilience and the ability of society and its members to cope with the difficulties posed during this period.

Data on Complaints Relating to Public Service that were Investigated by the Office of the Ombudsman

31.6% of the total number of complaints investigated by the Office of the Ombudsman during the period under review concerned public service.

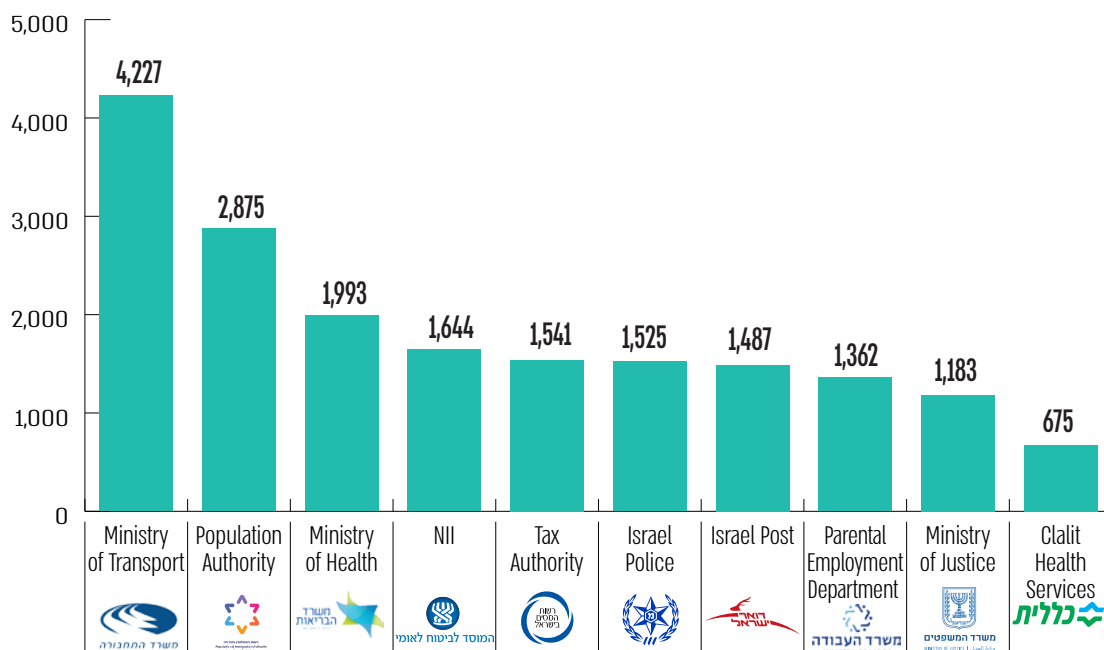
The percentage of justified complaints and rectified complaints about public service during the period under review stood at 50%.

This percentage is significantly higher than the average percentage of justified complaints and rectified complaints out of all the complaints received during the period under review, i.e. 43.8%.

The following chart shows the ten bodies against which the highest number of complaints about public service were filed during the period under review²:

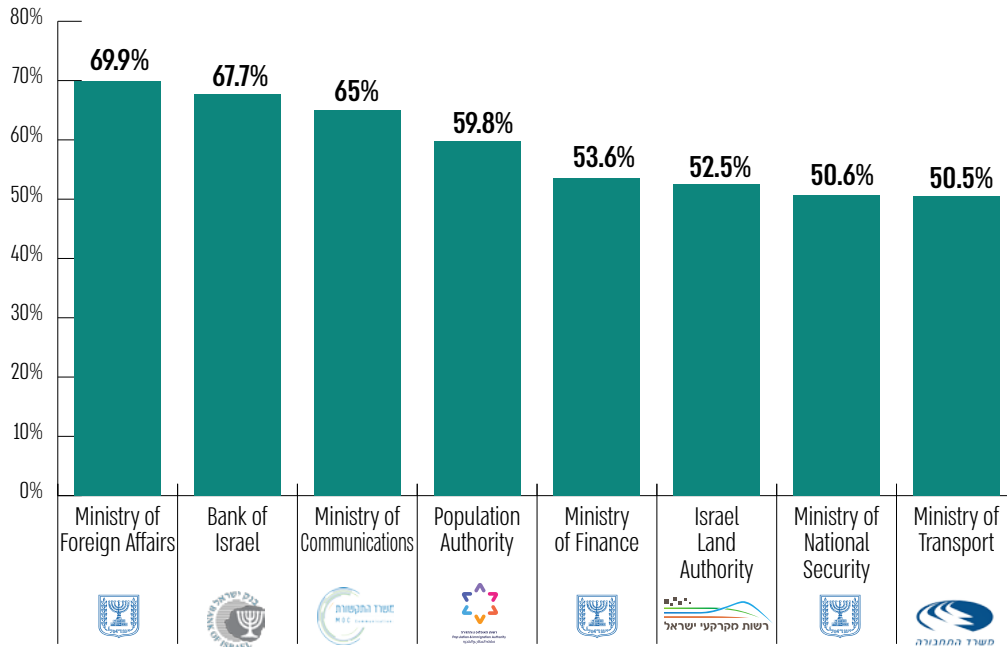
2 The data displayed in this chart and the following charts pertaining to the Department for the Encouragement of Parental Employment (Parental Employment Department) relate to the Ministry of Labor and Welfare until August 2021 and to the Ministry of Economy from September 2021 to December 2022. In 2023 the Ministry of Labor was reestablished and the department was reassigned to it.

Chart 1: The ten bodies against which the highest number of complaints about public service were filed during the period under review



Where the percentage of complaints filed against a particular body on the subject of public service is very high, in relation to the overall percentage of complaints filed against that body, this can signify the need for that body to pay greater attention to this issue. The following chart shows the bodies against which more than 50% of the complaints filed against them concerned public service.

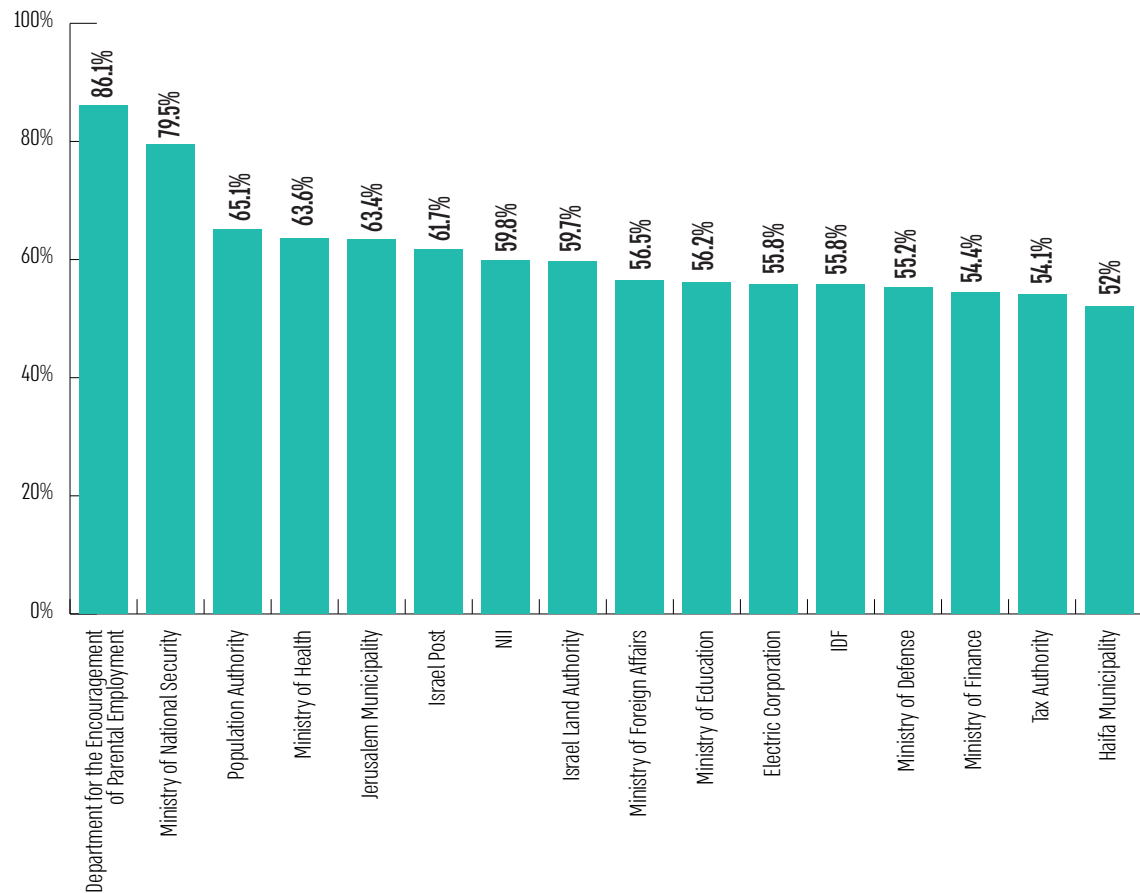
Chart 2: The bodies concerning which more than 50% of the complaints filed against them during the period under review related to public service*



* Bodies against which more than 240 complaints were investigated during the period under review.

The percentage of justified complaints and rectified complaints about public service during the period under review stood at 50%. In some of the bodies, the percentage of such complaints was higher. The following chart shows the bodies where the percentage of complaints about public service was higher than the overall average.

Chart 3: The bodies concerning which the percentage of justified complaints and rectified complaints about public service was higher than the overall average (50%)*



* Bodies concerning which more than 270 complaints about public service were investigated during the period under review.

Results of the Public Service Survey

The Office of the Ombudsman conducted a groundbreaking survey relating to selected public bodies, with the aim of examining different aspects of public service. The bodies were selected according to the following criteria: (a) the Office of the Ombudsman annually receives no less than hundreds of complaints against them on different matters; (b) they provide nationwide public service; (c) they have service centers in various locations, call centers and websites. As stated, the bodies are as follows: the NII, the Tax Authority; the Population Authority; the Ministry of Transport; Israel Post; Amidar; the Electric Corporation and the Israel Land Authority. Statistical advice was received in formatting the surveys, analyzing the data accumulated from them and determining the scope of the samples.

The survey examined the quality of service provided by the service centers of the bodies, the service level of their call centers and the information and different services on their websites.

Each one of the selected bodies has service centers (also referred to as reception centers) in five different districts: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, the South and the North.

During the months of February and March 2024³, staff members of the Office of the Ombudsman visited the service centers of the selected bodies. Two visits were made at different times to each of the five service centers of each body, so that in total ten visits were made to the service centers of each body

3 Where necessary, data were sometimes supplemented and improved at a later date.

Furthermore, the Office of the Ombudsman's staff examined the information and different services appearing on the website of each of the bodies. In addition, online inquiries were sent to each of the bodies to check the timeframe and quality of the response given.

When assessing the service level of the call centers, staff of the Office of the Ombudsman checked the availability of the center and different aspects of its service quality.

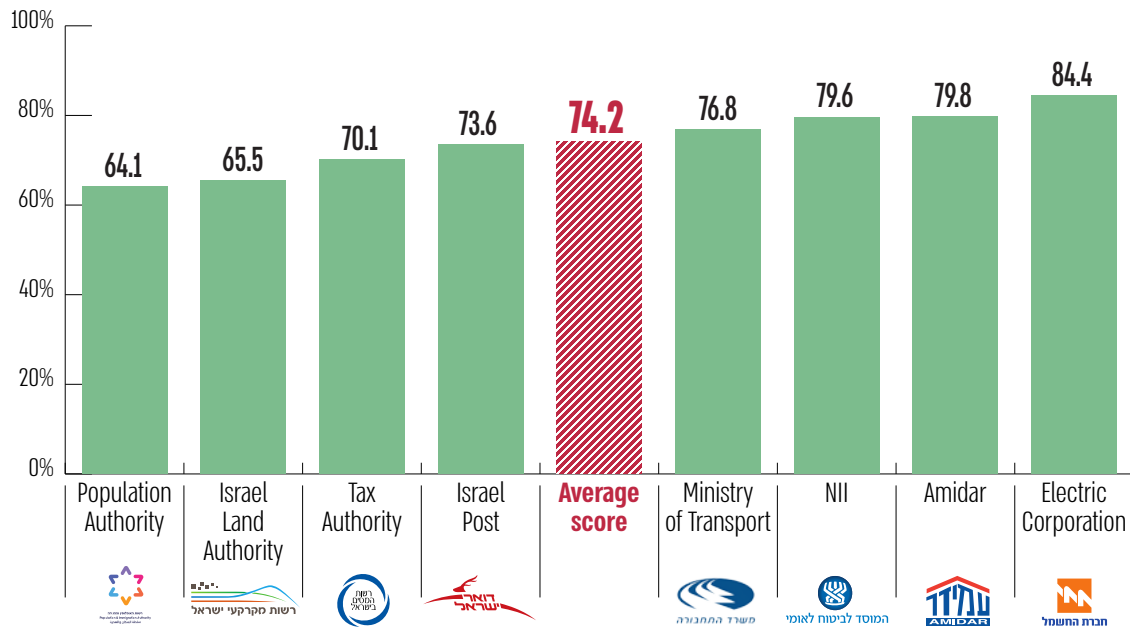
All the surveys vis-à-vis the selected bodies include questions concerning various aspects of the service provided, so the overall score comprises a large number of variables.

The components of the scores in each of the surveys conducted within the service centers, on the website and in the call centers are described in detail in Appendix 1 of the report.

The general score of each body in the survey is obtained by weighting the scores of the different components. 50% of the total score was allocated to the survey results relating to quality of service at the reception centers of the bodies, 25% was allocated to the survey results relating to their websites and 25% was allocated to the survey results relating to the service level of their call centers.

The following chart shows the weighted score of each body in the surveys conducted by the Office of the Ombudsman:

Chart 4: Weighted grading of service quality



The average weighted score of all the bodies is 74.2.

The Electric Corporation received the highest weighted score vis-à-vis quality of service, followed by Amidar, the NII and the Ministry of Transport.

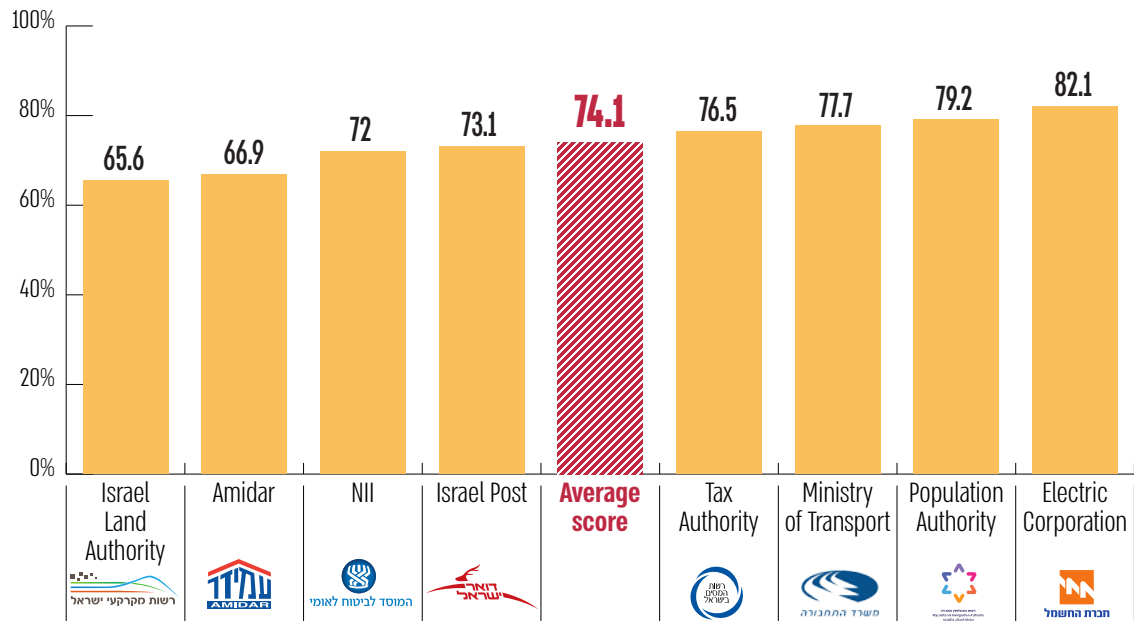
Four bodies received a weighted score that was below the average: the Population Authority, the Israel Land Authority, the Tax Authority and Israel Post.

The following are the scores received by the bodies in each of the components.

Quality of service at the reception centers

The following are the scores received by the selected bodies relating to the quality of service at the reception centers:

Chart 5: Quality of service at the reception centers











It can be seen that the average score received by all the bodies in the reception center service quality index is 74.1 out of 100. The Electric Corporation received the highest score in this index - 82.1, followed by the Population Authority - 79.2.

The Israel Land Authority received the lowest score - 65.6.

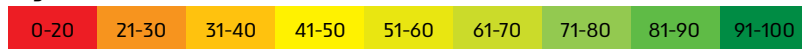
The following is a heat map of the bodies' scores under the sub-topics comprising the score vis-à-vis quality of service at the reception centers. This chart illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of each body in relation to the different sub-topics⁴.

4 A heat map is a tool for infographic representation of the different scores. In the following heat map low scores are displayed in shades of red; the lower the score, the darker the shade of red displaying it. High grades are displayed in shades of green; the higher the grade, the darker the shade of green displaying it. Shades of orange and yellow display the intermediate scores.

Chart 6: Bodies' scores under the sub-topics comprising the score relating to the quality of service at the reception centers

Weight	Sub-topic	 NII	 Israel Post	 Electric Corporation	 Ministry of Transport	 Amidar	 Population Authority	 Tax Authority	 Israel Land Authority
25%	Queue management	83.5	78.1	81.1	79.4	85.5	76.8	84.7	81.2
20%	Opening hours	16.0	96.0	80.0	69.8	13.4	62.2	48.4	21.0
15%	Access and direction	85.6	84.7	86.8	89.3	85.3	79.3	89.0	83.3
15%	Accessibility aspects	93.6	57.6	91.7	82.0	83.0	91.7	88.7	74.5
10%	Provision of service and information in languages other than Hebrew	69.3	43.5	70.0	57.2	63.1	87.3	65.9	44.4
10%	Cleanliness and appearance	93.2	73.9	91.8	89.8	89.0	93.8	92.8	97.2
5%	Quality of auxiliary services	95.3	25.0	57.5	69.6	48.3	75.1	61.9	65.0

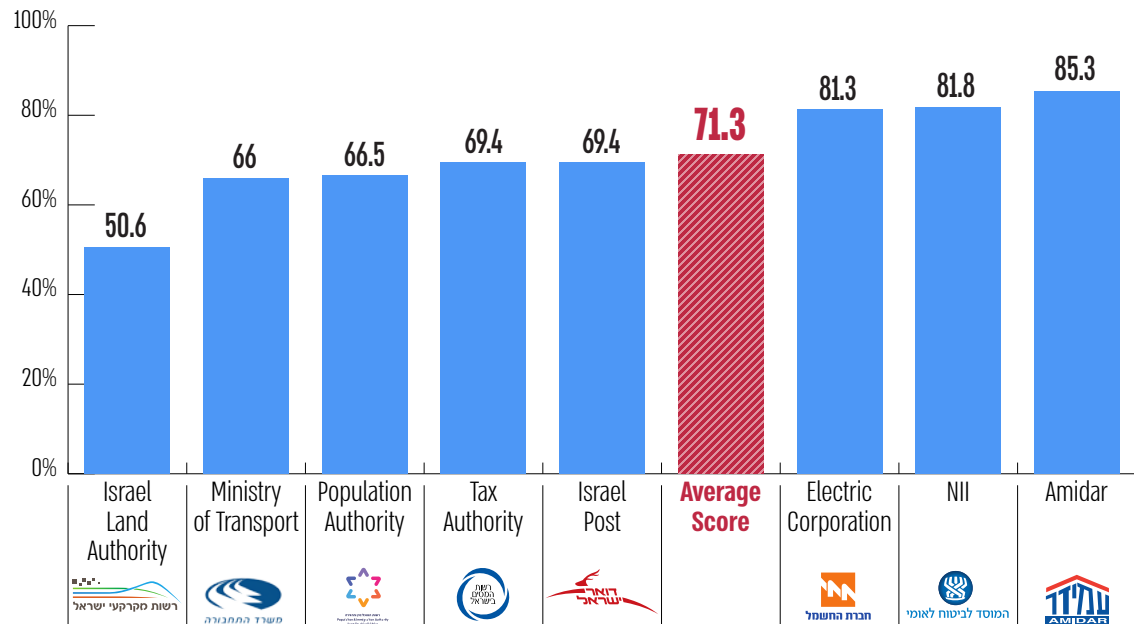
Legend



Examination of the information and various services on the bodies' websites

The following are the scores received by the selected bodies relating to the quality of information and various services appearing on their websites:

Chart 7: Quality of information and various services on the bodies' websites











It can be seen that the average score received by all the bodies in the website quality of information and services index is 71.3. Amidar received the highest score in this index - 85.3, followed by the NII - 81.8. Most of the bodies received a score that was below average for this index.

The Israel Land Authority received a score of only 50.6.

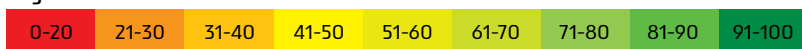
The following is a heat map displaying the scores of the bodies under the sub-topics comprising the score vis-à-vis the quality of information

and various services on the bodies' websites. The map illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of each body relating to the different sub-topics.

Chart 8: Scores of the bodies in the sub-topics comprising the score relating to the quality of the information and various services on their websites

Weight	Sub-topic	 Ministry of Transport	 Population Authority	 NII	 Tax Authority	 Israel Post	 Amidar	 Electric Corporation	 Israel Land Authority
20%	Scheduling appointments	50	11	57	29	93	75	100	
20%	Response to inquiries via the website	37.5	87.5	85	80	62.5	100	65	
10%	Information on the website about the various services	75	100	100	100	75	100	100	100
10%	Information on the website about possible ways of making contact	80	80	80	80	80	80	60	40
10%	Information on the website in languages other than Hebrew	90	90	100	75	0	90	75	0
10%	Performing actions online and receiving indicators	100	75	100	50	75	50	75	50
10%	Handling of online inquiries	40	40	70	80	70	100	90	30
5%	Information on the website about the opening hours of the service center and about the services available and the existence of a Service Level Agreement (SLA)	100	67	67	83	67	67	67	67
5%	Existence of a personal area	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Legend



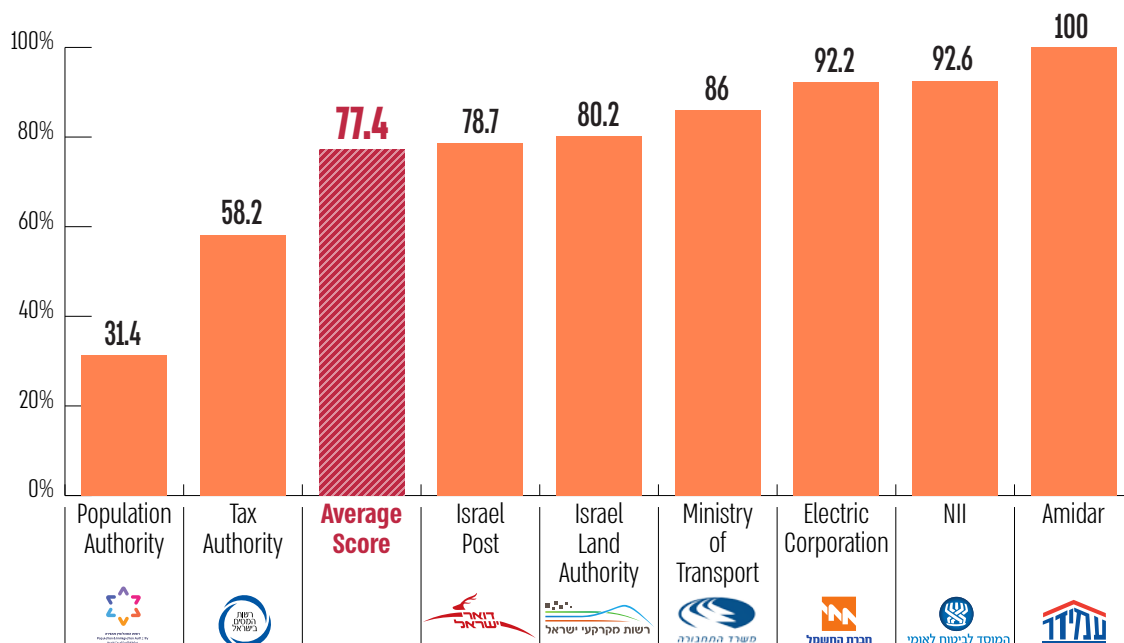
Service level of the call centers

An efficient call center enables the service user to receive information and perform actions quickly and efficiently, without the need to visit the body's service center. This service is especially important for people who have difficulty performing actions independently on the body's website due to a lack of digital literacy. Service users can receive from the call center information about the service they need and the documents required for receiving it; via the call center they can schedule appointments for visiting the service centers and receive information about the status of the applications filed by them.

The Office of the Ombudsman examined the efficiency of the call centers of the selected bodies. To this end, Office personnel contacted the call centers and checked the time it took to be answered by a representative, the possibility of leaving a message and receiving a return call and the opening hours of the center. They also checked whether it was possible to receive a service in languages other than Hebrew, and whether the center operated an interactive system for the routing of calls (IVR) in other languages. The answering timeframes were checked by making 30 calls to each of the call centers.

The following are the scores received by the selected bodies vis-à-vis the service level of their call centers:

Chart 9: The bodies' scores relating to the call centers



The disparity between the bodies relating to the service level of the call centers was more prominent than in the previous indices: quality of information and services on the websites and quality of service at the service centers.









It can be seen that the average score received by all the bodies in the call center service level index was 77.4. Amidar received the highest score in this index -100; the NII also received a very high score - 92.6, as did the Electric Corporation - 92.2.

The Population Authority received a particularly low score in this index - only 31.4.

The following is a heat map displaying the scores of the bodies under the sub-topics comprising the score vis-à-vis the service level of the

call centers. This chart illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of each body under the different sub-topics.

Chart 10: Sub-scores received by the bodies under the sub-topics comprising the score relating to the service level of call centers

Weight	Sub-topic	 Ministry of Transport	 Electric Corporation	 Population Authority	 Tax Authority	 Israel Post	 Israel Land Authority	 NII	 Amidar
40%	Waiting time before being answered	90	86	2	87	86	93	98	100
25%	Possibility of leaving a message and receiving a return call	100	100	0	0	100	100	100	100
15%	Opening hours of the call center	100	100	70.0	90	70	70	90	100
10%	Possibility of being answered in a language other than Hebrew	50	90	100	50	90	75	75	100
10%	Interactive system for routing calls (IVR) in languages other than Hebrew	50	90	100	50	0	0	75	100

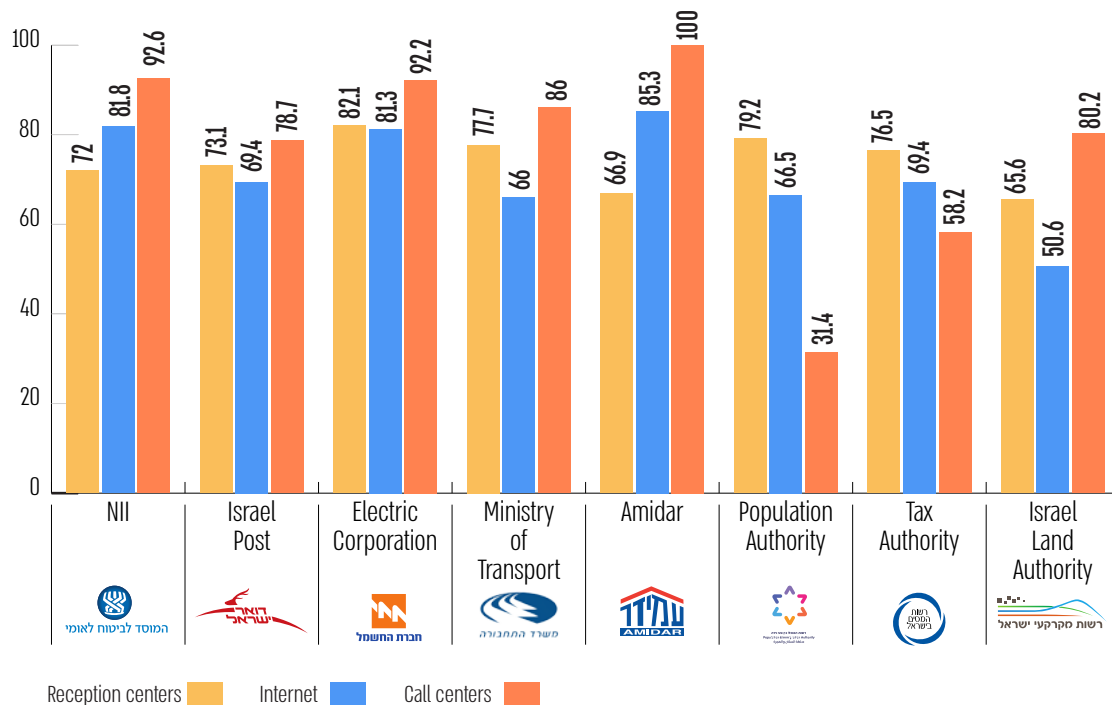
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0-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	81-90	91-100
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The scores of all the bodies in the different service indices disclose that with regard to the service level of the call centers, the average score of the bodies is the highest - 77.4. The average score of the bodies vis-à-vis the service at the service centers is 74.1, and their average score regarding information and services on the websites is 71.3.

The following is a comparison between the scores received by each body in the different service indices:









Chart 11: The scores of each body in the different public service indices



It can be seen that some of the bodies received similar scores in the different service indices, but others received a higher score in one index and a lower score in other indices.

The following heat map illustrates that some of the bodies showed strengths in all the indices examined, while others disclosed weaknesses in certain indices, in comparison to other bodies.

Chart 12: The weighted scores received by the different bodies in the various indices

	 NII	 Israel Post	 Electric Corporation	 Ministry of Transport	 Amidar	 Population Authority	 Tax Authority	 Israel Land Authority
Service at reception centers	72	73.1	82.1	77.7	66.9	79.2	76.5	65.6
Information and services on website	81.8	69.4	81.3	66	85.3	66.5	69.4	50.6
Service of call center	92.6	78.7	92.2	86	100	31.4	58.2	80.2

Legend



Appropriate Public Service - Basis for Gaining Public Trust and Tool for Achieving Social Goals

Public service does not meet much competition and its targeted users are a "captive audience", since they do not have other options.

In light of the large number of public bodies and the manner in which areas of responsibility are divided up among them, a ponderous bureaucracy is frequently generated which makes it difficult for the service user, and often for the public body itself, to determine which body is responsible for handling the problem encountered by the service user, who is thus referred from one body to another.

Where the internal allocation of responsibility among the various functionaries within the body is not defined appropriately and there is no one source for coordinating the handling of applications and inquiries of the public, it is often unclear even to the functionaries themselves what their areas of responsibility are.

Consolidation of the standards for the provision of public service, the creation of mechanisms for delivering an effective and reasoned response, the shortening of bureaucratic margins and coordination between the different governmental sources and the exchange of information among them, can all increase the efficacy of public service, reduce government expenditure and enhance the public's trust in the public systems and services.

In light of the importance of improving public service processes, many countries, including Israel, have over recent decades adopted the approach that the public service provider must, as far as possible, tailor the manner of providing public service to the needs of the service user. This approach is contiguous with the perception of these countries that public service is a tool for the take-up of the administrative, social and other rights granted to the service user. The service user is a "client"

who is entitled to receive the service by virtue, not by grace, and the state must do everything in its power to facilitate their receiving it.

It is important to emphasize that defects in the provision of service, even if they are not at the heart of the service, are likely to constitute one of the main barriers to the take-up of rights, especially among the most vulnerable sectors of society. Proper public service thus promotes the take-up of rights by vulnerable communities.

The Office of the Ombudsman places emphasis on identifying and minimizing bureaucratic barriers relating to the provision of service for the citizen, believing that effective, equal and high-quality service should be given to the citizen. Bureaucratic barriers force the applicant to invest a lot of time and energy into receiving the service, and often to incur monetary expenses, in a manner that inflates the "administrative cost" of exercising their rights.

Public Service Benchmarks

The appropriate public service benchmarks described in the report relate to four main aspects of public service that arose from the investigation of complaints:

1. The mechanisms and procedures for handling public inquiries.
2. The service of call centers and the information provided by them.
3. The service delivered at public reception centers.
4. Online services and the information on the Internet.

Mechanisms and procedures for handling inquiries

One of the mainstays of appropriate and high-quality service is the provision of an effective response to questions, claims and inquiries relating to the manner of and conditions for receiving the service.

This refers both to the response to the initial request for service and to the responses given in the course of the service process, during which the service user or the public body may be required to provide information or documents, or to take various actions.

The Office of the Ombudsman receives numerous complaints on various issues concerning the manner in which inquiries about public service are answered and the quality of the response. This report presents many insights into different aspects of the response to and contact with the public - the proactive handling of inquiries; the prevention of delays; the alignment of expectations; the acknowledgment of receipt and interim responses; the handling and supplementation of documents; the duty to respond in writing; the provision of a final response; the application of discretion in reaching a decision, and so forth.

The efficacy and availability of means of contact with the public - the service in call centers

One of the most available and swift means of contact between the service provider and the public is an efficient call center for the public. The efficiency of the call center is measured by its availability, its accessibility, its flexibility and the ability of its representatives to explain clearly to the service user how to receive assistance without the bother of having to go in person to the service center.

The operation of an efficient call center contributes to making the services accessible to the public, providing the citizen with direct access to the service representatives without having to compose and clarify an inquiry in writing. The operation of the call center also enables the swift handling of simple problems and recurring issues, and the provision of information about channels of service, ways of applying and relevant contact persons.

The report presents defects which the Office of the Ombudsman has brought to the attention of different bodies vis-à-vis the time taken for the call to be answered, the preparedness of the call center for new service processes, the quality of the information provided by the call center's representatives and the way in which the inquiries are forwarded for further handling.

Direct access to the service provider - the service at the reception centers

Even in the digital age, frontal reception of the public at service centers still acts as a central channel for providing effective service, and it is incumbent on bodies providing public services to enable the citizen to receive service in this manner. For many service users, the operation of alternative digital services does not constitute an alternative to receiving service at the bodies' reception centers. Furthermore, certain services can only be received by visiting the service center, there being no other way to receive them.

The reception hours of the service centers are expected to be broad, providing reception of the public both in the morning and the afternoon. Appropriate arrangements must also be made during busy times and when there are long lines.

When investigating complaints, the Office of the Ombudsman also addresses the quality of the service provided at the reception centers, and the report contains examples of complaints on this subject.

Online services and the updating of information - the Internet

A central feature of appropriate public service is allowing actions to be carried out online. This service saves time and enables the users to receive what they require without disrupting their daily routine and troubling them to make a special visit to the service center. Of no less importance is enabling the receipt of information online. Public bodies must ascertain that the information that it publicizes is accurate and facilitates the take-up of rights.

Key insights relating to the provision of public service arise from the report, and special attention must be paid to them:

1. The service user as "client" - improving public trust in the public service and fairness in the provision of service

Public bodies must take measures to enhance public trust in the manner in which they handle inquiries and provide the service, in order to lay a foundation for public trust in the public systems.

Public bodies must instill in their service users the perception that the service is aimed at them as clients, and the bodies must base the public inquiries system on this perception accordingly.

Public bodies are obligated to regulate the mechanisms for handling the inquiries that they receive, in a manner that ensures that the citizen

is treated appropriately and fairly.

To this end, public bodies must consider the need to improve their mechanisms for handling inquiries and ensure the provision of an appropriate response. They must also take care to provide effective and uninterrupted treatment of the matter at hand throughout the process, starting from the acknowledgement of receipt of the inquiry, to the supplementation of necessary documents and finally to the provision of a reasoned response that meets the requirements of administrative law.

2. Public inquiries as a tool for monitoring and gaining information

Public inquiries are a central tool for helping the body to monitor its actions and identify the needs of those contacting it.

The public inquiries system of the public body should serve as a significant focal point of organizational knowledge for the body, assisting it in gaining information and improving its service. In order to provide appropriate service, convey relevant and precise information and decrease the number of recurrent inquiries, the body must learn from experience and conduct monitoring processes relating to the different requirements of the public using the services, based also on the public inquiries that it receives.

3. New services or changes in the terms for receiving services must be accompanied by preparation and preparedness in the public inquiries system of the body.

Before the introduction of a new service, the body must consider the need for service providers to prepare themselves for handling inquiries from the public on the subject.

This matter is illustrated in the report by the following description of a complaint filed against the Ministry of Transport:

As part of their arrangements for introducing a new service, public bodies should also prepare themselves in advance for handling public inquiries on the matter

From time to time, public bodies may introduce new, broad-ranging services, such as intensified debt-collection campaigns, changes to the terms of eligibility for a certain period and measures for shortening lines. Apart from making the professional arrangements, the public body should also give guidance to its personnel responsible for handling public inquiries, to enable them to address inquiries of members of the public who are interested in using the new service or are required to use it.

■ Collection of old debts

Some complainants expressed grievance at receiving from the Ministry of Transport demands for payment of a vehicle registration fee, even though they had no longer been using the vehicles in question for several years, having sold them for scrap or taken them off the road.

According to the complainants, over the years they had not received any demands for payment for the vehicles, and immediately after receiving the said demand they contacted the Licensing Department of the Ministry and asked for an explanation. The complainants pointed out that even after providing documents showing that they were no longer using the vehicle, they were not exempted from payment, and were sent from one clerk to another in the Licensing Department, until being informed that in light of a new regulatory proviso they were obligated to pay.

The investigation revealed that the Ministry of Transport had undertaken a campaign for the collection of old debts. The complainants had neglected to legally remove their cars from the Ministry of Transport records, and therefore the demands for payment had been sent to them lawfully.

Notwithstanding, it was found that the debt-collection campaign had been conducted without the Ministry of Transport making advance preparations for handling the inquiries of people who had received demands for payment. In the demand letters it stated that if the vehicle had been scrapped or permanently taken off the road, the recipient should contact the Licensing Department. In practice, people who had contacted the Licensing Department and presented documents proving that the vehicle in question had been taken off the road were not given pertinent answers, but were referred from one clerk to another.

▼ Below is an excerpt from a letter that the Office of the Ombudsman wrote to one of the complainants following the investigation:

” Following inquiries and discussions on the issue, the Ministry of Transport took several measures to address the matter, including formulating a scheme for the cancellation of debts of persons who declared that they had not used the vehicle in the years during which the debt had accumulated, and establishing a public inquiries mechanism designed for handling applications for settling and cancelling the debt. We have been informed that within a few weeks, drivers with debts will be receiving letters from the Ministry of Transport, detailing possible ways of settling and/or cancelling the debt”.

(1068394), (1062048)

4. Removal of barriers to the provision of service and the promotion of rights take-up

Public bodies must be aware of any uncertainty generated in the course of the provision of service as to the allocation of authority among themselves. The bodies must also devise mechanisms for coordinating with and receiving information from other bodies and from different sources within the bodies themselves.

The public bodies must strive to develop systems for sharing information, as well as unified systems for streamlining the service provided and minimizing barriers to the provision of the service and the take-up of rights.

All public bodies must develop mechanisms for removing bureaucratic barriers thereby enabling service users to exercise their rights, especially communities in need of the bodies' services and who are deserving of special attention or require language-accessibility or other accessibility measures.

The report contains the following example of a complaint against the head of department of the Yavne Municipality service center who refused to allow a service user to speak with a service representative in Russian:

Public bodies must allow the provision of service in a language other than Hebrew, subject to the availability of the service providers

In the State of Israel there are many population groups that speak languages other than Hebrew. Furthermore, about a fifth of the Israeli population speaks Arabic. The public authorities must take care, as far as possible, to provide service not only in Hebrew, but in other languages as well, subject to the availability of the service providers. The aim of this is to prevent impairment of the service provided.

■ The representative accommodated the complainant by speaking to him in his mother tongue - but the head of department intervened

The complainant went to the Yavne Municipality in order to receive services. Despite his understanding Hebrew, he spoke to the service representative in Russian, after discerning that she spoke the language.

In the course of the conversation, the head of the department intervened and instructed the service representative to provide the service in Hebrew only. The complainant pointed out that the head of the division also refused to allow the representative to deliver the service in Russian.

The complainant expressed grievance at the violation of his dignity and the denial of the possibility to receive service in a language that would make it easier for him to understand the process.

▼ **The following is an excerpt from a letter of the Office of the Ombudsman to the municipality:**

” One of the tools for dealing with discrepancies stemming from differing cultural characteristics is language-accessibility and tailoring the services to the various communities and their needs, especially when dealing with an ongoing relationship between the resident and the local authority and services provided by it to its residents.

Making public services language-accessible displays an aspiration for equality, enabling people who do not speak the language of the majority to use services and receive information in the best possible manner. Language-accessibility is even more important when the service delivered is the provision of essential information, which enables the resident to act in accordance with the Planning and Building laws, and thus avoid committing criminal offences.

There are various ways for removing barriers to the use of services, which emanate from language-gaps. One of them is the provision of the service in a language other than Hebrew. It seems that in general, language-accessibility enables the delivery of service that is of higher quality and is more efficient and personal. In the case in question, it was possible to remove the barrier easily, since the committee staff member speaks

Russian, the language in which the complainant feels comfortable; from her point of view there was no reason not to provide the service in the desired language.

[...]

The municipality and the committee must refine the procedures and clarify in writing for all staff-members that there is no prohibition against providing service for residents in a language other than Hebrew - if this can make things easier for the service user and if the service provider speaks the language well enough - to ensure that the information provided is accurate". (1083520).

The following are some more examples of the issues addressed by the benchmarks presented in the report, based on the decisions of the Office of the Ombudsman in the framework of the investigation of complaints against various bodies:

Ensuring the efficacy of public inquiry systems

- A public body should appoint a coordinator for the handling of public inquiries, and in the absence of such a coordinator the body should ensure the operation within its departments of mechanisms for the coordination and monitoring of public inquiries.
- A public body should take care to allocate regularly and constantly the requisite manpower for ensuring the operation of a public inquiry system that will provide a professional response to inquiries.
- The public authority should ensure the uninterrupted handling of an inquiry, even when several sources within the authority are involved.
- Even if a timeframe for performing a particular action has not been determined, if the public body is required to apply its authority according to law, it should do so as soon as possible, in accordance with the law and with due diligence.

- Public bodies should apply schemes and mechanisms for sharing and conveying the information required for performing their duties.
- A public authority that enables the receipt of service via several channels must make this clear to persons contacting it, and must not refer them to one particular service channel.
- Public bodies are required to give reasons for their decisions. If the public body is asked for an explanation about a particular action taken, it may not suffice with a laconic answer but must enumerate the reasons for taking that action.

Partial or inappropriate response

- A public authority was required to respond to all the points raised in the inquiry

A public body responding to an inquiry must address all the points raised in the inquiry

- **She contacted the Ministry of Education on a number of issues - and received an incoherent reply**

The complainant, who works for the Ministry of Education, contacted the Senior Department of Pedagogic Personnel concerning a number of matters. However, the Ministry of Education responded to her inquiries in an incoherent and uncordial manner.

Following the intervention of the Office of the Ombudsman, the complainant received a response to all the matters that she had raised. The Office pointed out to the Ministry of Education that a response to an inquiry should be coherent and pertinent, should be given within a reasonable amount of time and should address all the issues raised.

▼ **"The Office of the Ombudsman wrote the following to the Ministry of Education:**

” In assessing the sequence of events in your handling of the complainant’s matter, we found grounds for pointing out that you did not provide a coherent and pertinent answer to the various issues raised in complainant’s inquiry, nor did you respond within a reasonable amount of time... your response to the issues raised in the complainant’s inquiry was conveyed to us (and not to her), and even then bit by bit and in the course of the investigation of the complaint”. (1063132)

- A public authority may not suffice with giving a short and partial response to an inquiry when the inquiry was detailed and included a request for explanations about an action taken.

Supplementation of documents

One of the pitfalls to maintaining the smooth handling of applications and inquiries is lack of clarity as to which documents are requisite. By clearly identifying the necessary documents and maintaining contact with the applicant, it is possible to avoid recurrent inquiries and delays, as described in the report:

- The handling of applications and inquiries often requires the applicant to furnish the public body with documents. The public body should be proactive, and if it requires additional documents for handling the application, it should inform the applicant of the need to provide the said documents; it should not shift the onus onto the applicant to check the status of the application and whether or not additional documents are required.
- A public body should devise mechanisms for integrating the supplementary documents that it has requested and for dealing with them. This is necessary to ensure that if the documents have been provided and the citizen repeatedly requests a decision pertaining to the application, the application will not be rejected

on grounds of the citizen's failure to provide additional documents.

- A public body should apply discretion before asking the citizen to provide original documents, if the citizen has already provided the body with them but they went missing in the course of the body's handling of them.

The duty to provide a final response in writing

As part of the duty of transparency in making governmental decisions, when a person writes to a public body, it is generally incumbent on the body, upon conclusion of the handling of the inquiry, to furnish a coherent and reasoned response in writing. One of the purposes of the written, coherent response is to enable the applicant to review the reasons for the decision and address them, if desired, in an appeal to the relevant agency or the court.

The following are examples relating to this duty:

- The duty to give an answer to a recurring inquiry as well, and not to rely on a response already given by a different body.
- Even if an applicant or claimant has not cooperated with the public body, and the inquiry or claim is consequently rejected, the authority must provide them with a final decision vis-à-vis the rejection.

The service at the service centers

The following are examples of issues addressed in the report concerning the service at reception centers:

- The public body should operate information systems that enable it to provide the applicant with complete information as far as is possible, without troubling the applicant to apply to other places or offices in the matter.

- A public body that requires the prior scheduling of an appointment for visiting its service center must establish procedures enabling it to provide service for persons without an appointment, in appropriate cases.
- The authority must ensure precise publicity of its service center's reception hours, in order to avoid misleading the public.

The importance of the availability and efficacy of the information provided by the call centers

- A public body that operates a call center is responsible for the center's providing high-quality service, whether or not there are additional channels of communication open to the citizens. The call centers enable a direct and available response and help to make the service accessible.
- Public bodies must ensure that the representatives of the call center or other service representatives coming into contact with the applicant have updated information pertaining to the status of the application.
- The call center of a public body must be a focal-point of information and provide information, without the caller needing to contact the body again via other service channels.

The services and information on the Internet and in digital channels

The increasing importance of digital channels of information and services compels public bodies to ensure that the information published on these information channels is accurate and is fully and routinely updated. However, digital service channels alone are not sufficient, and the public body must provide diverse service channels and maintain traditional channels of inquiry.

- A public body must operate several channels, among them digital channels, for making documents accessible, including for population groups that do not receive services from it on a regular basis.
- In addition to the duty of the public body to operate digital service channels, it must maintain the traditional methods of contacting it, as required by law. For example, it must, by law, continue to permit citizens to file inquiries by fax, even if there are other traditional channels for receiving services, such as at reception bureaus.
- The public bodies must be clear about their service cancellation and monetary reimbursement policy, and publish full information about it for the public. The following is an example of such a complaint taken from the report:

A public body must ensure that its service cancellation and reimbursement policy is publicized in full on its website, enabling the public to know in advance their right to cancel a service and receive a refund for the cancellation

Many public bodies charge a fee or payment for the provision of a service. Sometimes after making the payment, the citizen requests to cancel the service and receive a refund of the sum paid. Public bodies must publicize clearly their policy relating to the cancellation of service and the reimbursement of monies paid.

■ **The cancellation policy of the Psychometric Test was not properly publicized on its website**

The complainant took the Psychometric University Entrance Test, which is conducted by the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation (NITE). Before receiving his score, the complainant asked to register for the

next Psychometric Test, in order to ensure his re-sitting the test should he be dissatisfied with his score. He complained that according to the information published on NITE's website, cancellation of registration entailed a 30% cancellation fee, regardless of the time the registration was cancelled, even if this was immediately after the registration.

Following the Office of the Ombudsman's inquiry, NITE clarified that in the case of cancellation of registration within 48 hours, it did not charge a cancellation fee, and in the case of cancellation of registration within 14 days, it charged a 5% cancellation fee only. However, the full cancellation policy was not publicized appropriately on NITE's website.

▼ **The Office of the Ombudsman pointed out to NITE the need to rectify this failing, as follows:**

” According to our examination and your response, this cancellation policy was not publicized fully and appropriately on NITE's website, and was not conveyed to the complainant in the reply to him... Kindly update our office regarding the clarification of the cancellation policy on NITE's website”. (1140820)

The duty to investigate complaints about the conduct of public servants

The Office of the Ombudsman investigates diverse complaints about the inappropriate behavior of public servants - speaking harshly or rudely, acting with scorn or disrespect, making inappropriate use of force, and so on. It is natural that the investigation of such complaints generally derives from the special circumstances of the case, and it is not always possible to establish from these cases broad benchmarks. The investigation of the facts underlying such complaints is complex, since as a rule the version of events given by the complainant, who has been harmed by the public servant's behavior, is contrary to that of the public servant, who sees things differently. Yet the public body or the complainant often have evidence that enable the Office of the Ombudsman to establish findings and determine if the complaint is justified.

The report emphasizes the duty of the public bodies to investigate in real time the allegations of service users that they have been mistreated, and to gather findings as close as possible to the event. The following is an example of one such complaint taken from the report:

The investigation of claims of a service user that they have been mistreated must be conducted in real time and not be prolonged over many months

Where a service user claims to have been mistreated by the service provider, an effective and swift investigation must be conducted and should not be drawn out over many months until the findings are established, even if the versions of several different players are required. The longer the investigation is delayed, the greater the likelihood that details relating to the event will be erased from the memory of those involved, thus impairing the public body's ability to ascertain the truth.

▼ She complained to the NII about the doctor's behavior - and was not answered

The complainant was examined by a member of the medical appeals committee following an appeal that she had filed with the NII. According to the complainant, the examination was not routine and had caused her great pain; she had even complained about this during the examination. The complainant claimed that she complained to the National Insurance Institute's Department of Public Inquiries about the violation of her rights due to the conduct of the doctor who had examined her, but for a long time did not receive a response. Only ten months after filing her complaint, and after sending reminders, did she receive a pertinent reply from the NII.

▼ **The Office of the Ombudsman pointed out the following to the NII:**

” The Office of the Ombudsman is of the opinion that an investigation that takes ten months is not a reasonable and effective investigation. Even if it was necessary to check the versions of the complainant... and of all those involved, this should have been done within the shortest period of time and as close to the event as possible, so as to be sure that the facts were fresh in the memory of those involved in the examination. If this had been done, the NII would have reached its conclusions within a shorter amount of time... The Department should have conducted a swifter investigation so as to establish whether in the course of the examination the rights of the complainant had been violated due the doctor's conduct, and should not have taken ten months to respond". (1073230)

Appendix 1

The following is a detailed description of the way in which the scores were determined in the various score components in each aspect of service reviewed at the service centers, the call centers and on the websites of the selected bodies:

Examination of service quality at the service centers

Each of the reviewed bodies has a service center in five districts: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, the South and the North. In February and March 2024⁵, staff of the Office of the Ombudsman visited the service centers of the bodies.

Two visits were made to each of the service centers at different times, so that ten visits in total were made to the service centers of each of the bodies.

The following are the components that were checked and the weight given to them in the score received by the specific service center:

Mechanisms for managing queues - 25%

The components of the score in this index are as follows: the waiting time from the moment of arrival at the service center till actual reception by a representative; the ability to schedule an appointment in advance; the possibility of receiving service without an appointment in urgent or pre-defined cases; the number of reception desks, as compared with the number of desks actually manned; the number of people awaiting service; the existence of a computerized system for managing the

5 Where necessary, data were sometimes supplemented and improved at a later date.

different appointments and its manner of operation.

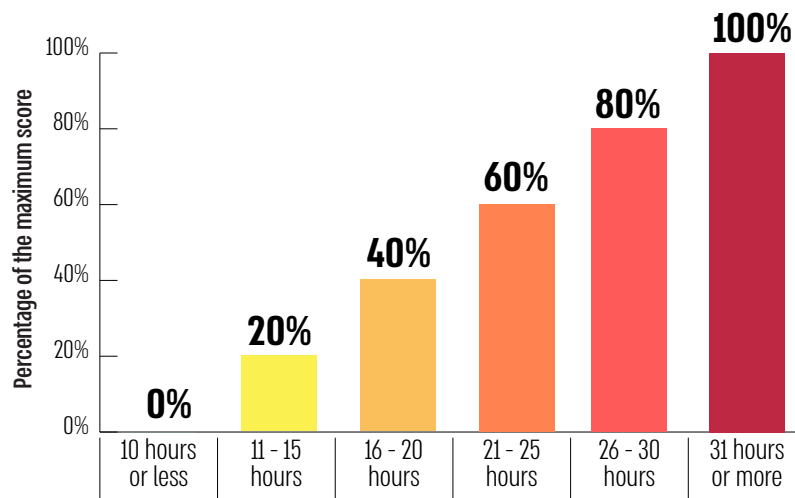
The waiting times were sampled both at each visit to the service center and by questioning some of the service-users after receiving service.

Reception hours at the service center - 20%

80% of the score in the service center reception hours index was allocated according to the overall number of weekly reception hours at the service center, and 20% of the score in this index was allocated according to the number of reception days at the service center in the late afternoon (after 3 pm).

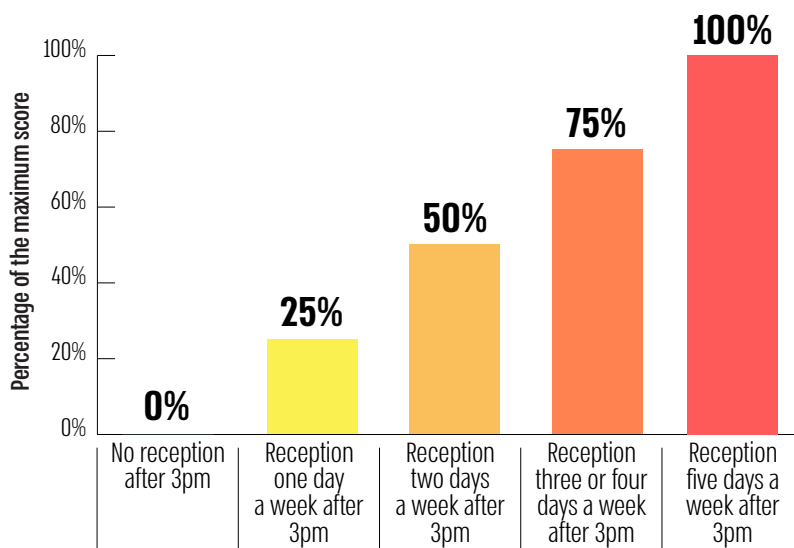
The score for weekly reception hours (80% of the score) was allocated according to the components shown in the following chart (score from 0% to 100%):

Chart 13: Number of weekly reception hours



The score for the number of days in which the body receives the public after 3 pm (20% of the score) was allocated according to the components shown in the following table:

Chart 14: Number of weekly reception days after 3pm



Access and direction to the service center - 15%

The components of the score in this index are: access to parking in the vicinity of the service center, for free or for a charge; the distance between the service center and the nearest bus stop; the existence of signs showing the direction of the service center and signs inside the center; the presence of an information desk, an usher or other person to direct the service users to the appropriate desk for the requested service.

Different aspects of the accessibility of the service - 15%

The provision of service that is accessible to the general population, including persons with various disabilities, is anchored in laws and regulations and obligates all public bodies to accommodate different aspects of accessibility. The survey does not presume to review all the aspects of accessibility required of the public body, but when determining the score, the basic aspects of accessibility of service to persons with disability were taken into account, such as the presence of accessible lavatories and elevators.

The score was also influenced by the following: the way the service at the service center is delivered to a person confined to a wheelchair; whether the service center operates an auxiliary system for the provision of services for persons who are hard of hearing, and if there are prominent signs directing such persons to it; if the waiting area includes accessible seats with grab rails; and if there is disabled parking near the service center, and if so - how many parking spaces are available. In service centers where there is more than one floor, the existence of a ramp or an elevator for passage between the floors was checked.

Provision of services and information in different languages - 10%

Israel is a state comprising population groups that speak different languages. The ability of a body to provide service in the language of the service user whose mother-tongue is not Hebrew is important, particularly in public service to which there is no alternative or competition. The score in this component was determined according to the possibility of receiving service and information in Arabic, English, Russian and Amharic. The weight of the score vis-à-vis the possibility of receiving service and information in Arabic - 50%, in English - 25%, in Russian - 15% and in Amharic - 10%.

Cleanliness and appearance - 10%

The Office of the Ombudsman personnel who visited the service centers of the selected bodies graded the level of cleanliness at the entrance to the service center, in the waiting area and in the lavatories, as well as the condition of the furniture at the center. These two components affect the comfort of the service users.

Auxiliary service envelope - 5%

Good service should include an auxiliary service envelope. Assessment of the auxiliary service envelope included whether or not the following components were present: a water dispenser and cups at the service center for the convenience of the visitors; a photocopying machine that is available to the public; wi-fi for public use; a desk for filling out forms; the possibility of filing forms without the need to stand in line; and self-service computer kiosks.

Examination of the information and actions that can be performed on the body's website

In this index, the bodies were graded according to the following variables:

Scheduling appointments - 20%

One of the main services that can be received on a body's website is the scheduling of an appointment to visit its service center. Examination of this variable comprised checking whether the website contained full information about making appointments, and whether it gave instructions vis-à-vis receiving service in urgent cases without making a prior appointment. A central component of the score is the waiting time from the time the appointment is made on the body's website to the actual appointment in each of the body's service centers.

Response to inquiries via the website - 20%

To check this variable, staff members of the Office of the Ombudsman sent several inquiries to each of the selected bodies, monitored the process for handling these inquiries until a final response was received, and assessed the quality of the response.

Information on the website about the services provided by the body - 10%

When determining the score in this variable, the following parameters about the website were examined: if there is a list of digital services at the public's disposal; if there are information sheets describing the services provided; if there is information about the documents required for receiving the various services, the cost of the service, the timeframe for giving an answer, and so forth. Also checked was whether there were tools for making rights take-up easier, such as calculators.

Information on the website about the possible ways of making contact - 10%

The website was checked to see if it provided information about the possible ways of contacting the body, including via the relevant call centers, email, WhatsApp or SMS text messages and online forms, and if the information relating to each of the ways of making contact could be directly accessed by just one click on the home page.

The score was given according to the various means for making contact published on the body's website and the quality of the information published.

Information on the website in languages other than Hebrew - 10%

Here the ability to receive information and service on the website in languages other than Hebrew was checked. The score weight of the possibility of receiving information and service on the website in Arabic was 50%, in English - 25%, in Russian - 15% and in Amharic - 10%.

Performance of actions online and reception of notifications - 10%

To examine this variable, the body's website was checked to see if it enabled the filing of online forms for the services that it provided, as well as making online payments. In relevant cases, the Office checked whether or not acknowledgments of receipt were received via text messages or notifications, including appropriate notifications for persons who do not own smartphones and cannot receive SMS messages.

Procedure for handling online inquiries - 10%

To examine this variable, the Office checked if an acknowledgment of receipt of an initial inquiry was sent; if it was possible to monitor the status of the inquiry on the website; and if a procedure for handling urgent inquiries was published on the website.

Information on the website about opening hours, the services available and the existence of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) - 5%

Here the Office checked the details published on the body's website concerning the opening hours of its service centers; if the various services

provided at each service center are enumerated; and if the times for the provision of each service are publicized. The Office also checked if the website contains a Service Level Agreement (SLA) defining the timeframes for responding to inquiries and handling different matters.

Personal area - 5%

To examine this variable, the Office checked if the body's website enables the user to enter a personal area where all their inquiries and notifications, and the services received by them, are concentrated.

The call centers

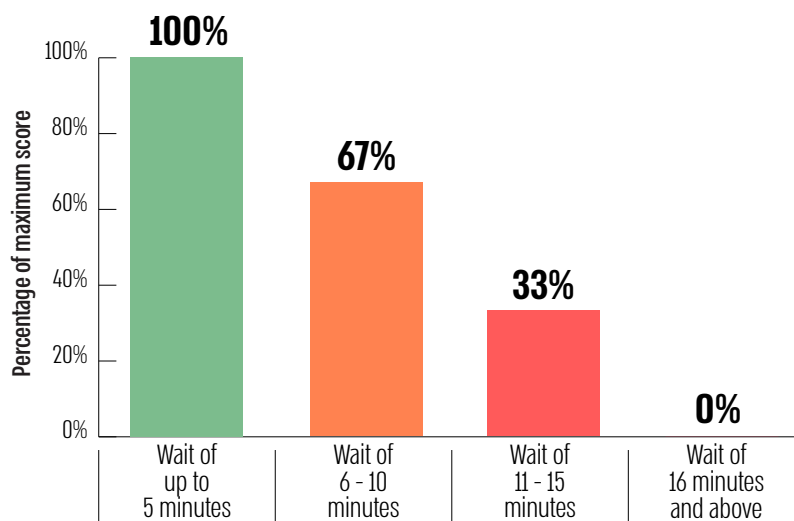
An efficient call center enables the service user to receive information and perform actions quickly and effectively, without the need to visit the service center. This service is particularly important for people who have difficulty performing actions independently on the website, since they lack digital literacy. Via the call center, service users can receive information about the service sought by them and the documents required; they can make appointments for visiting the service centers and receive information about the status of the handling of their inquiries.

The Office of the Ombudsman assessed the efficiency of the call centers of the selected bodies. Staff members of the Office called the centers and checked the waiting time before being answered by a representative, the possibility of leaving a message and receiving a return call and the opening hours of the center. Also assessed was the possibility of receiving service in languages other than Hebrew and the existence of an interactive system for the routing of calls (IVR) in languages other than Hebrew. The waiting times were assessed by making 30 calls to each of the call centers.

The following chart details the components that were examined and the weight given to each of them in the score received by the specific call center.

Waiting time before being answered by a representative - 40%

Chart 15: Waiting time before being answered by a representative of the call center



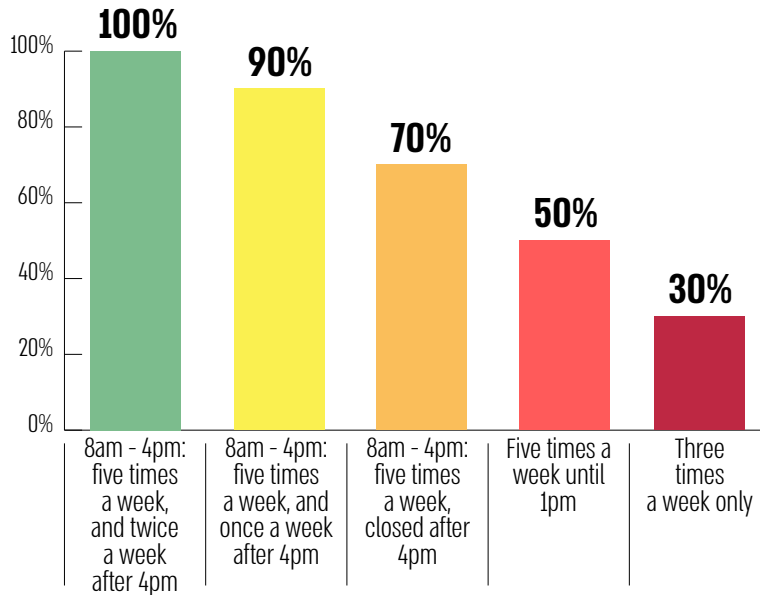
Possibility of leaving a message and receiving a return call - 25%

The possibility of leaving a message and receiving a return call within two business days at the most was checked.

Opening hours of the call center - 15%

Opening hours of the center from Sunday to Thursday⁶ between the hours of 8am to 4pm, and if it operated after 4pm, were examined as follows:

⁶ In Israel, the standard work week is from Sunday to Thursday; the weekend is observed on Friday and Saturday (translator's note).

Chart 16: Availability of the call center

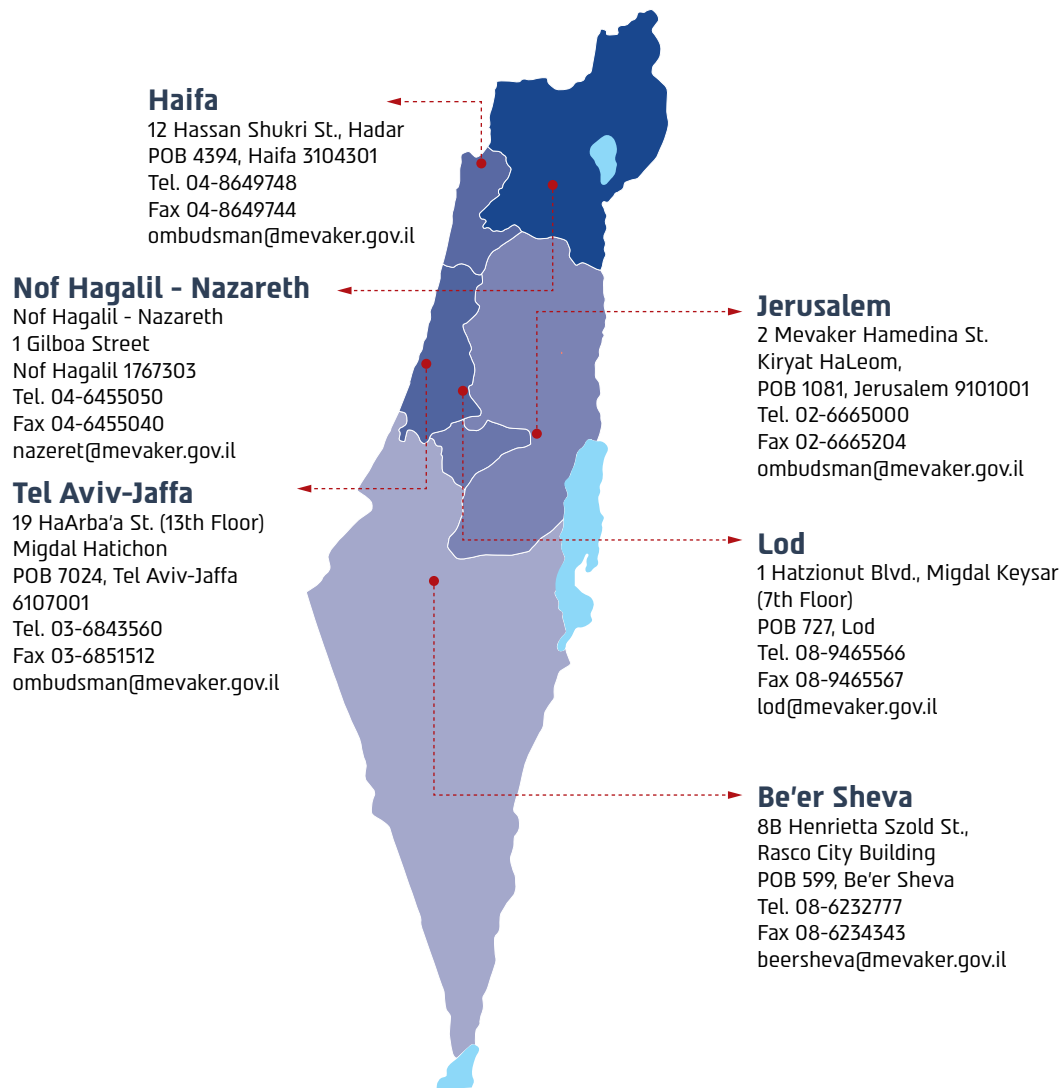
Possibility of receiving a response at the call center in a language other than Hebrew - 10%

The ability of call center representatives to provide service in languages other than Hebrew was assessed. The score weight of the possibility to receive service in Arabic is 50%, in English - 25%, in Russian - 15% and in Amharic - 10%

Interactive system for routing calls (IVR) in languages other than Hebrew - 10%

The call center was checked to see if it operated an interactive system for the routing of calls (IVR), placing emphasis on languages other than Hebrew. The score weight of the possibility of routing calls in Arabic is 50%, in English - 25%, in Russian - 15% and in Amharic - 10%.

Contact Details of the Office of the Ombudsman



Ombudsman website
mevaker.gov.il/he/ombudsman



Email
ombudsman@mevaker.gov.il



Reception hours in the Office's bureaus
From Sunday to Thursday
between 9:00 and 13:00
Wednesdays
also between 15:00 and 17:00



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