



Support to the Decentralisation Process  
Поддршка на процесот на децентрализација

**FCG** Finnish Consulting Group  
International

## **Various steps and methods for improving citizen information and advisory services in the municipalities**



Support to the Decentralisation Process  
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# Various steps and methods for improving citizen information and advisory services in the municipalities<sup>1</sup>

Local self government gets its justification from local democracy, citizen's possibility to affect on local issues, legal acts, services, development and environment. This democracy takes places indirectly through their elected representatives and directly through citizens direct personal participation and involvement mechanisms into the municipal affairs. Citizens expect proper municipal services, adequate to their needs and interests. The municipality has to work permanently on building the capacities in order to respond to these challenges.

Most of the citizens are relatively passive and do not actively participate in the common affairs. In general, the most common reason is certainly the lack of confidence into local authorities' willingness to take into consideration citizens' right to be involved and to participate into municipal decision making procedure. However, most of them are regular clients of the increased number of municipal services that have to be provided according to the law. The ongoing decentralisation process rapidly increased the citizens' demands toward municipal officials to organize the services on a proper way, as well.

According to article 8 of the Law of local Self-government "The organs of the municipality, the council committees and public agencies established by the municipality shall be obliged to inform citizens about their work, as well as the plans and programs which are of importance for the development of the municipality without any compensation in the way determined by the statute. The municipality shall be obliged to enable access to the basic information about the services it provides to its citizens, in a way and under conditions determined by the statute of the municipality." The Law on Free Access to Information with Public Character regulates also the citizen's information services.

Activities to achieve high level effectiveness in local functions must be based on the principals of openness and transparency in performance of the competences as a priority. No doubt that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a short advisory paper for municipalities (distribution is planned through ZELS) on various steps and methods for improving citizen information and advisory services, including easy and quick solutions and development of citizens Info Points (Access Points).

the municipality has to establish efficient mechanisms to strengthen capacities for permanent information of the citizens, entrepreneurs and various local stakeholders using two channel communications. At the same time, the municipality can and shall improve the citizens' access to services. Limited municipal resources definitely have an impact on the number and the level of quality of provided services, but that does not influence considerably on the creation of a friendly and co-operative atmosphere.

Vision of the Macedonian Municipal Service Centre model is to develop one unit called "Municipal Service Centre" that groups information and service delivery under "one roof", and to harmonize, standardize and upgrade service delivery to a common standard in all municipalities. This statement includes the key point -"standardized service delivery" as a base for equalization and unification of the current practices and procedures on the national level. It will guarantee that the citizens will primarily have access to the municipal services on a similar advanced level using almost the same templates and legal/working procedure. They will not have to lose time to find information and "friends" as well as to wait for the fulfillment of their request more than is really necessary. The order in the processing of requests and the quality of the final decisions will improve significantly as a result of the decreasing pressure to the employees that are authorized to prepare the final documents. The role of the municipal elected officials will be only to monitor/evaluate the performance/communication and to propose measures for future development. The results could be evident and easily compared among municipalities. The communication among employees in the Municipal Service Centers of different municipalities could be established in a network and used for clarification of the details that might come up in practice. With the installation of standardized MSCs it will be possible to evaluate more precisely each individual's contribution and result as a civil servant. Internal working procedure for communication and tasks performance that are planned to be introduced will be a plus for the efficiency of the MSCs and municipal administration as a whole. Well defined and functional MSCs supported by available municipal capacities and resources according to their own strategic goals could be an important instrument for increasing transparency and mutual confidence which might have an influence on generating more revenues to the municipal budget through better tax collection.

How to welcome the citizen to enjoy municipal services? This is a question which should be asked and replied locally in every municipality. In fact, this is usually a question to be answered by the elected representatives and municipal employees as well as by the municipal service enterprises and public companies. The same question is naturally valid on local services of various state organisations. Until now, there is no standard respond to this question. It requires time to assess local capacities and citizens' needs and to define/foresee an optimal model that could be functional in a long run. This gradual and serious approach with a clear vision is hard to be followed everywhere on a same way, but the application in few municipal services/info centres shows positive results from this experience. Building confidence between municipal authorities and citizens/relevant stakeholders is a long term process that should be invested in

and **encouraged constantly in order to satisfy the citizen's right to enjoy using the services.**

### **General information on the municipality and its organisation:**

Each municipality could provide a Municipal bulletin/brochure on the organisation and competences of the elected municipal officials/representatives, tasks of different units, municipal experts, public enterprises and service institutions, municipal contact people for public relations and others, titles, telephone numbers, addresses, e-mail links, links to municipal neighbourhood/community offices, projects that are ongoing. This bulletin may be published and distributed regularly (once in the year/every second year) to the households in the municipality, published in local newspaper, in internet, distributed in key service units and Municipal Service Center, possibly in co-operation with local enterprises. It may be enlarged to a municipal telephone catalogue, municipal administration/business catalogue, possibly including other local service links and maybe combined with illustrative material and maps. The same materials may be put to the municipal web-site and updated more often.

A municipal web-site tends to be a normal municipal method to inform the citizens on the municipal organisation as well as to establish permanent direct communication with them, on local services and on acute development issues and happenings in the municipality. Most of the citizens, however, are still unable to use the internet, but the need and accessibility of these information services is continuously growing. It is preferable to have this service in two or three languages.

Examples of data on the municipal website can be:

- Contacts for the municipality, offices and service units of the municipality
- Presentation of the municipality - municipal profile - statistical information on the municipality
- Information on existing municipal services
- Actual information, municipal news
- Electronic version of the Municipal gazette or newsletter
- Strategic plans and Calendar of activities
- Information on enterprises in the municipality
- Maps
- Contacts for the elected politicians
- Information on local associations and NGO sector (links)
- Information on the Municipal Budget – last adopted version
- Information on actual urban plans and ongoing projects

- Links/contacts to all other municipal institutions (schools, social and health welfare, police) as well as state/government agencies

Special municipal internet pages may be created for some of the following citizen groups:

- Tourists
- Entrepreneurs
- Potential foreign investors
- Students/youth and other vulnerable groups
- Unemployed
- Ethnic minorities

Special internet tools for citizens' participation may be created for some of the following purposes:

- Minutes of municipal council
- Feedback system for citizens
- Minutes of municipal committees
- Agendas of municipal council before meetings
- Draft urban plans during the preparation phase
- Discussion forum
- Electronic citizen initiative
- Questions-answers service
- Opinion surveys (Direct communication with the citizens - surveys of certain issues using the opinion poll possibility)

The local newspapers, radio and TV are important tools for municipal information. In order to strengthen the participatory approach/transparency in municipal society, the use of media needs open dialogue. The task of media is not to tell how well the things are, but also to promote open public discussion on acute challenges as well as to offer proposals and possible solutions. Such discussion needs open access to media where various interest (vulnerable) groups and citizens could express their views preferably in a critical way using facts and arguments. From the other side, the municipality itself is widely responsible for that the media receives correct and accurate (free access) information. The media needs an appointed contact person for public relations in the municipal administration, and his/her duties are to inform and communicate regularly on the issues of public character/interest. The municipal administration as whole has to be aware of the need/approach for establishing regular citizens/public communication, so all of them have to contribute on providing certain information. This might also be important for strengthening accountability among municipal officials.

Providing different opportunities for the citizens to present their initiatives, comments, questions, complaints and appeals on an easy way is certainly a part/sign of the level of local democracy and a welcome method in municipal life. It is not easy for ordinary citizens to make a paper on comments or complaints, and for that reason they need advice, information on regular channels/addresses and how to operate as well as guidelines where to present their views. The Internet is, no doubt, a modern tool for this, offering advanced options, but traditional boxes in the municipal offices etc. or a specific appointed expert in the organisation for these tasks are simple examples of some solutions in specific cases. The municipality has to build a system how to promote and to protect this way of citizens' communication, to react on these initiatives and complaints timely and also how to respond regularly in a proper way. The procedure of appeals is presented in the article 29 of the Law on Local Self-Government. According to the law, a detailed reply to appeal has to be provided to the appellant in 60 days after the receipt of the appeal.

Public meetings/hearings between the mayor, members of municipal council, municipal/public company experts and citizens are also a tool in local communication (mutual information and discussion). Such meetings may take place in a specific community/local neighbourhood/village, or through many villages, on an important topic like municipal budget or strategic documents, urban plan or a major project concerning overall interest. The local neighbourhood community may be a partner in organising a public meeting/hearing. These meetings need to be promoted well in advance to the citizens using suitable methods. Media is usually welcome to participate.

In all above issues the language matter may be important. The municipality serves also its minority language groups. In many cases, several languages may be used according to the law.

### **Entrance to the municipal office**

Entrance to your home gives the feeling of your atmosphere and family. In the same way the entrance to the municipal office tells the atmosphere and attitudes in the municipal office. The municipal office and its entrance should be considered from the perspective of a citizen who does not know the office well and tries to get some services.

The entrance to the municipal office usually shows a lot about the level of transparency/openness in each of them. How to find the municipal office and Municipal Service Centre may often be a serious question for the citizens and other stakeholders. The solution could be to use good practices in this respect like a big address map somewhere next to the entrance roads to the municipality, welcome message for the visitors, street signs to show

where the municipal building and other related institutions are located, a map on the internal municipal organisation, of the office space, sectors, units and officials inside the municipal building, near the entrance.

In front of the municipal office a panel that clearly identifies the municipal building/office, as well as similar panels for the different offices with municipal seal/flag, address, web-site and other available contacts could be presented. The Municipal Service Centre will have to position a panel on its entrance that will contain other contacts as well. The language that is used has to be in accordance with the Law. Not less important are the additional specific instructions for easy entrance into MSC and to the nearest parking available which certainly could be helpful for the citizens.

While entering the municipal office, the internal atmosphere and service orientation approach become very clear. It is not the same if the citizen enters into an empty/unpleasant and not user-friendly hall without any necessary information and meets only a security officer. If there is not a friendly, service orientated receptionist, map of the offices, numbered rooms, enough light, 5-20 sitting places/chairs for the people waiting and other details, that might influence a lot on the atmosphere in the negative sense. At that case, the citizens would not be attracted at all to come and to cooperate with municipal officials. The settings in the entrance hall and Municipal Service Centre should be monitored and improved on a daily basis by the competent professionals. Money in the Budget should to be allocated for the maintenance of the MSC equipment.

It is also useful to have a visible information board with the names/contacts, positions and services that the municipal employees can provide and the number of their offices as well as the official working time. This might be highly recommendable for the smaller municipalities with 5-10 employees assigned in one unit only.

Whenever citizens do not know the current municipal organisation, they however may know that it is lead by the Mayor. In that case, they often try to come to the Mayor for many small issues which some other municipal expert could more easily clarify/solve for them. The Mayor may waste his/her valuable leadership time in such less strategic discussions. As a manager of the organisation, the Mayor is also responsible for the delegation of tasks and for using his/her experts efficiently. It is good if the Mayor could allocate some time weekly for direct communication with the citizens who insist to have such a meeting, but only for the specific issues communicated through the MSC. In the other, difficult cases regarding citizens' requests, a municipal expert team, consisting of the heads of departments and units, should primarily build the attitudes/stands/proposals on regular weekly meetings and to inform the employee who is appointed to process the requirement in question or to inform the client.

For those citizens who need only telephone services, the municipality should provide a number for permanent communication (if possible free of charge and in 24 hours time) offering them possibility to talk (to leave messages) to the official who is in charge and then, afterwards, the official could listen to the recorded (updated) information and process it. The municipality has to provide easy access to the municipal telephone catalogue of the different units for the citizens. One well operating telephone exchange and good service in it is certainly like a good business card of the municipality. The operator should have information about the availability of the municipal officials. Transfer of the call here and there in the organisation without clear information is a poor/non-functional service. If the expert asked for is absent, someone else should be appointed/in charge to record the contacts/calls or to put on paper requests for reply later on. The colleagues may serve each others also as a previously agreed municipal working procedure.

Above are mentioned several examples of simple and non-expensive methods, which can easily be implemented in any municipal office to improve information and service delivery practices to the citizens. In order to clarify their implementation, the key principles of internal information/networking and communication responsibilities in the municipal office and among the municipal service institutions and public enterprises may be collected into a municipal information policy document. It can be prepared internally among the key experts in charge and approved by the Municipal Council or by the Mayor. This document could serve as a basis for the development of municipal citizens' service oriented policy.