



The COVID-19 pandemic-
Business continuity within
the public administration

October 2022



The COVID-19 pandemic

–

Business continuity within the
public administration

Report by the Auditor General
October 2022

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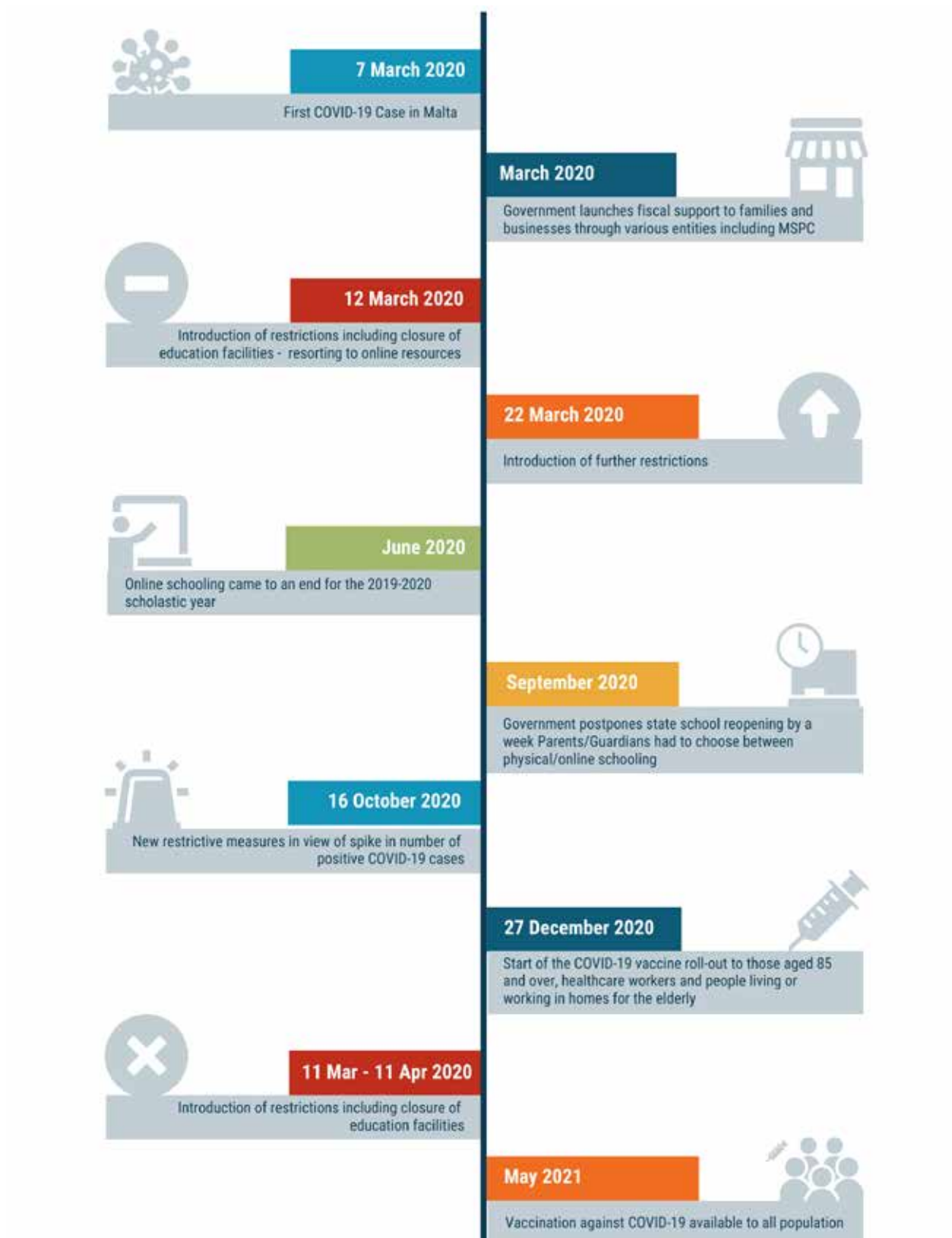
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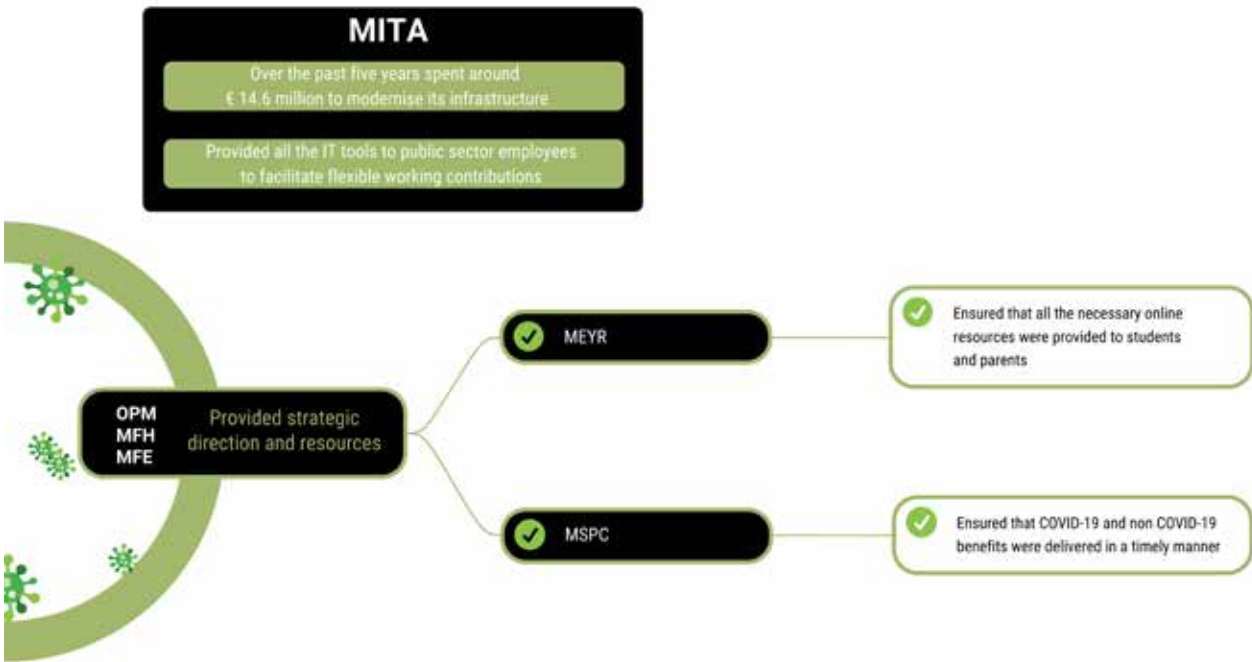
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CIOs	Chief Information Officers
CPSU	Central Procurement Supplies Unit
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
CRSP	COVID Result Submission Portal
DCC	Digital COVID Certificate
DP3T	Decentralized Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
EFGS	European Federated Gateway Service
EU	European Union
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IIP	Individual Investor Programme
IMU	Information Management Unit
IPS	Institute for the Public Service
ISSAI	International Standards of Supreme Audit Institutions
IT	Information Technology
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
LESA	Local Enforcement System Agency
MAGNET	Malta Government Network
MAPSS	Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students
MFE	Ministry for Finance and Employment
MEYR	Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation
MFH	Ministry for Health
MITA	Malta Information Technology Agency
MSPC	Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights
MTA	Malta Tourism Authority
NAO	National Audit Office
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
QSCS	Quality Service Charters
SAG	Senior Advisory Group
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SPH	Superintendence of Public Health
TM	Transport Malta
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
VPNs	Virtual Private Networks
WHO	World Health Organisation

Key Facts

COVID-19 pandemic timeline of events



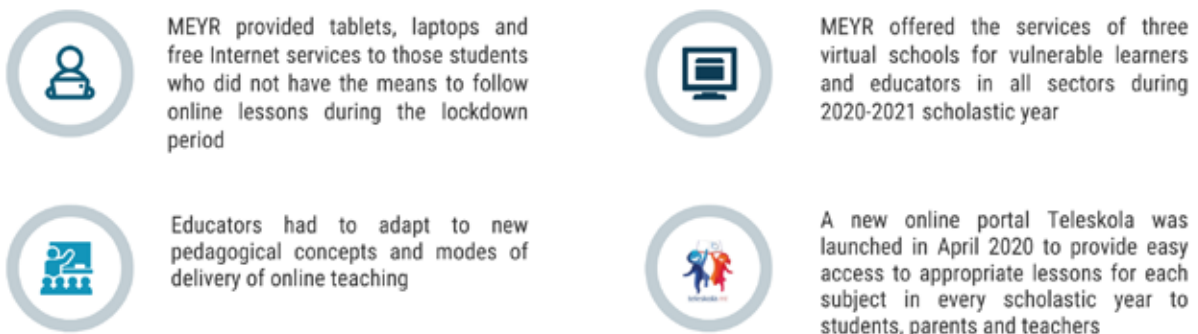
Entities responsible to ensure business continuity



Business continuity within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights



Business continuity within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation



Executive Summary

Introduction

1. The abrupt and brutal disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic tested the public service's resolve to its limits. The pandemic compelled public servants to dedicate all their time and energy to contain the spread of the virus whilst trying to respond to its accompanying socio-economic fallout, requiring them to adapt to the developing situation and improvising quickly and constantly along the way.
2. This performance audit on COVID-19 business continuity within the public administration sought to determine the extent to which Government ensured the continuity of its services and operations whilst ensuring a timely, cost-effective and efficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, the NAO adopted a two-tiered approach, by first assessing the whole of Government strategic and corporate approach led by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), in conjunction with the Ministry for Health (MFH) and the Ministry for Finance and Employment (MFE). Secondly, the NAO selected two Ministries – namely the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights (MSPC) and the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) – as case studies for its assessment of the implementation of Government's response to ensure business continuity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in its line Ministries. The scope of this audit did not extend to the merits of policy decisions since such analysis falls outside the NAO's mandate.

Government's plans and infrastructure to facilitate business continuity

3. OPM, MFH and MFE were the main players championing initiatives, providing strategic direction and resources to ascertain that the public service continued with its operations, in terms of service accessibility, public health safety and financial measures as well as arrangements to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.
4. Despite the emergency brought about by the pandemic, the public administration generally continued with its core operations albeit with varying levels of disruption. The evidence elicited through this performance audit showed that, generally, the Ministries assuming leading responsibilities during the pandemic embraced the principles of good governance against predetermined criteria relating to planning leadership, communication and coordination, transparency and accountability as well as efficiency and effectiveness.

MITA's central role in ensuring business continuity within the public administration

5. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) experienced an increase in demand for some services operated by the Agency. To address these evolving circumstances, MITA reorganised its resources to service the increased workload in certain sections. Additional shifts were also introduced to extend service provision beyond normal day operations. The increase in operational staff in these sections was necessary to ensure business continuity within the public service and to cover for the possibility of pandemic outbreak within MITA employees.
6. In the past five years, MITA spent around €14.6 million on infrastructural enhancements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this investment was instrumental in safeguarding the entire Government's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure. MITA also assisted the healthcare sector to setup the Information Technology (IT) infrastructure for swab centres across the Maltese islands, as well as to operate telemedicine and contact tracing systems amongst others. During this period, the Agency was also critical in providing all the IT tools to more than 30,000 public administration employees through the installation of virtual private networks (VPNs), cloud services, as well as videoconferencing (Microsoft Teams or Zoom) applications. These IT tools enabled the Government to provide its employees flexible working conditions, including remote working arrangements to meet their immediate needs, whilst ensuring that the general public continued to be served.

Business continuity within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights

7. MSPC adapted rapidly to the external changing circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry's expedient response in part was due to mechanisms, which MSPC has already established, namely those relating to remote working. Simultaneously, and with minimal costs, MSPC managed to introduce the temporary COVID-19 benefits by slightly amending its operations to provide these services in a reasonable time. Meanwhile, the Ministry also continued with its plan to shift its customer interface from the social security hubs to the servizz.gov.
8. Analysis carried out by this Office, showed that service provision by MSPC remained to the pre-pandemic levels. The NAO reached these conclusions on the basis of an analysis of a sample of eight benefits, from the total population of 54 social security benefits, where the NAO assessed the level of productivity and the extent to which the Ministry disbursed benefits by their scheduled dates. The sample of eight benefits included the four benefits which MSPC introduced to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, namely the (Additional) Disability Benefit, (Additional) Parent Benefit, (Additional) Medical Benefit and the Additional Unemployment Benefit. The other four case studies related to both contributory and non-contributory benefits namely the Children's Allowance, Age Pension, Survivors Pension and Two Thirds Pension. The latter benefits are amongst the most financially material within these two categories of benefits.

9. This Office noted that MSPC did not encounter any significant problems relating to its operations and service provision during the pandemic. However, the opportunity exists for MSPC to strengthen its monitoring function by ensuring that it has comprehensive and reliable data relating to its customer interface. This will necessitate coordination with servizz.gov, who have now assumed the customer interface services. Moreover, the monitoring function would be further strengthened by the commissioning of ad hoc studies, to gauge employee and customer experience, which in turn would serve as an input to the compilation of a contingency plan and quality service charter.

Business continuity within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation

10. Schools resorted to online teaching for students to complete their syllabus, when all the schools in Malta and Gozo closed in mid-March 2020. Teachers had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of online teaching, for which they may not have been trained. On the other hand, learners, especially those from marginalised groups who may not have had access to digital resources or struggled to learn on their own, were at risk of falling behind during this period when schools were closed as a mitigation measure during the pandemic. Within this context, the Ministry's Information Management Unit (IMU) played a very important role to ensure the continuation of educational services with the provision of tablets, laptops, and free Internet services to those students who did not have the means to follow online lessons during this period.
11. The NAO commends the initiative taken by the Ministry to offer the services of three virtual schools for medically vulnerable learners and educators in Primary, Middle and Secondary school level so that they could follow lessons according to their class timetable when schools re-opened for the 2020-2021 scholastic year.
12. The MEYR had to ensure that all the necessary online resources were provided to students and parents so that they could make use of them. However, the provision of these resources needed to improve both in terms of interactive facilities and also in the content available. In this context, a new online portal Teleskola was launched to provide easy access to appropriate lessons for each subject in every scholastic year to students, parents and teachers.
13. The sudden shift to teaching and learning at home brought with it a number of challenges and opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic between March and June 2020 as well as academic year 2020/2021. This came to light through an online survey that the NAO designed and disseminated to all Heads College Network, schools administration and educators within Government State schools.
14. Whilst the concept of online schooling was beneficial to ensure continuity of the scholastic year during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, children at the early years, children that require special educational needs, had to be accompanied by an adult at all times, which was not

always possible. In general, it was very difficult for these children to follow lessons on their own especially if their parents had to work from home at the same time.

Overall Conclusion

15. This performance audit showed that, generally, Government entities managed to carry on delivering their core services. Equally as important was that Governmental entities adhered to governance principles to implement COVID-19 related principles. This audit focused on two line Ministries, but the NAO is cognisant that in some other cases, such as those related to health, business continuity translated in the provision of a considerably reduced level of service due to the prevailing circumstances, which were absorbing available resources. The NAO augurs that Government entities undertake postmortems to elicit the lessons learnt, particularly those related to processes which could be retained beyond the pandemic and to enable further updating of national contingency plans.

Recommendations

16. In view of findings and conclusions emanating from this audit, the NAO is proposing the following strategic recommendations aimed at the public administration in general and specific recommendations for the line Ministries selected for this audit, to mitigate risks, as well as to sustain good public governance in emergency situations:

Strategic recommendations aimed at the public administration in general

- i. Respective Ministries, led by OPM, are encouraged to sustain their efforts with respect to the drafting and/or updating of their business continuity plans. These plans help Ministries to respond effectively and in a timely manner to significant events that may occur in the future. Moreover, these plans help to ensure business continuity by the respective Ministries to include preventative controls, recovery strategies and should be regularly reviewed and kept up to date. This will entail consultation with all relevant stakeholders.
- ii. Ministries are urged to have the appropriate guidelines, suitable contractual arrangements, and clear communication lines to maximise the benefits of remote working conditions. This will entail that Ministries draw up policies, establish key performance indicators and ascertain that employees working remotely are fully cognisant of their responsibilities. Such measure will further help to instill a culture of accountability and transparency.
- iii. Respective Ministries are to develop the appropriate Quality Service Charters (QSCs). These charters should serve to inform customers of the level of service that they should expect to receive, and which are updated to reflect emerging circumstances. Management can use QSCs to benchmark performance and thus enhancing this monitoring function.

- iv. Ministries are to sustain their efforts and work on the lessons learnt during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Good practices adopted are to be sustained in view that we are still in a situation of public health emergency of international concern.
- v. Studies are to be carried out on an ongoing basis to evaluate the feedback received from both clients as well as from employees. These studies help to assess the Ministries' performance in a continuous changing environment and serve as an input to further service improvements.
- vi. Government is to continue building on the work already done on eGovernment services with the aim to:
 - Improve further the customer experience when using existing online services.
 - Reduce the need to request further assistance through phone calls and emails to call centres and departmental helpdesks.
 - Reduce the need to physically go to a department to access services that are already available online.

This may require further customer surveys to highlight areas for improvement, process reviews and possible further streamlining of front and back-end processes. This consultation process can be extended to international partners in the field to learn from their experiences. This type of fora is not only required in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but on a regular basis.

- vii. Government is to continue to adopt new working arrangements, which were introduced during the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. An example in this regard, relates to the use of Microsoft Teams that facilitated virtual meetings. Through the use of such platforms, travelling time was reduced with its inherent benefits to the environment. This emphasises the need to strike a balance between the traditional and new working arrangements particularly since the successful introduction of hybrid modes of working arrangements during the pandemic.

Specific recommendations for the line Ministries selected for this audit

- viii. MSPC and MEYR are to strengthen their respective monitoring functions with respect to day-to-day operations such as those related to the management of employees working remotely. Consistent monitoring of performance helps Ministries to measure and evaluate efficiency in meeting responsibilities and accomplishing objectives and goals.
- ix. Servizz.gov are encouraged to sustain their improvements in technology and data recording through their current Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems over the coming

year. The latter are to include in-built features to appropriately categorise the recording of queries received and customer complaints. Such features facilitate data inputting as well as enable timely data analysis for decision making purposes by streamlining searches.

- x. MSPC and servizz.gov are encouraged to enhance the levels of communication between the two entities. This particularly relates to the transfer of data between the two parties such as that concerning customer inquiries and complaints. In turn, timely communications between these parties will help to further improve the level of their respective performances as well as customer satisfaction levels. Moreover, during extraordinary circumstances such as a pandemic, communication between entities becomes more critical as it helps to improve service delivery and streamline operations. The NAO acknowledges the current efforts of servizz.gov and MSPC towards this end.
- xi. MEYR should strengthen the level of communication between the Ministry and the schools' administration. In turn, the schools' administration should make sure that any kind of information that is received, such as circulars issued by the Ministry's Directorates, are disseminated to its own staff and ensure that everyone is kept in synch.
- xii. MEYR is to strengthen further the current monitoring of the educational performance of all school children. This type of monitoring will further enable MEYR to identify gaps in learning as a result of the disruption to schooling due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- xiii. Whilst the concept of Teleskola was triggered as a response to the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, the scope behind this initiative was to strengthen the concept of online learning and assist all the children in their learning process. MEYR are encouraged to continue investing in its resources in maintaining the online portal Teleskola, both in terms of interactive facilities and also in terms of content available. This service would also be beneficial for children who are sick, especially those for a long-term period and those who are hospitalised.

Chapter 1 | Terms of reference

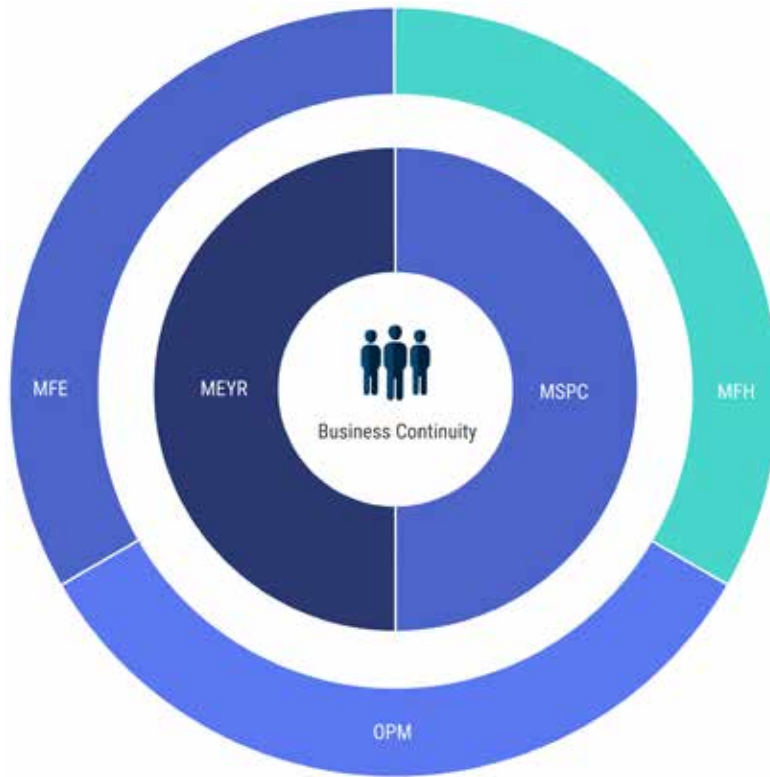
1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Business continuity is a process of establishing a system or a plan of prevention and recovery to deal with potential threats or crises, whilst ensuring that public and/or private entities continue fulfilling their functions in an effective, efficient, and timely manner.
- 1.1.2 The abrupt and brutal disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic tested the public service's resolve to its limits. The pandemic compelled public servants to dedicate all their time and energy to contain the spread of the virus whilst trying to respond to its accompanying socio-economic fallout, requiring them to adapt to the developing situation and improvising quickly and constantly along the way.¹
- 1.1.3 Furthermore, as argued in the National Audit Office's (*NAO Preliminary Review: NAO's role in reviewing Government's measures relating to the COVID-19 pandemic*), during the pandemic, national Governments worldwide faced difficult challenges relating to the procurement of goods, intervention in a market-based economy and the maximisation of social welfare. At the start of the pandemic, countries were simultaneously competing for personal protective equipment and other healthcare material. However, small states such as Malta faced greater struggles in view that these countries do not have the infrastructure to produce the goods and have limited capacity to access the available stocks. At this juncture, it is to be noted that despite these challenges, Malta always managed to procure all the medical material required.
- 1.1.4 The Preliminary Review was the first in a programme of audit work which is planned to be undertaken by the NAO leading to more in-depth analyses of Government's mitigation measures. This Report on COVID-19 Business continuity within the public administration is the second assignment in this series of audit work. This performance audit seeks to determine the extent to which Government ensured the continuity of its services and operations whilst ensuring a timely, cost-effective and efficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, the NAO adopted a two-tiered approach, by first assessing the whole-of-Government strategic and corporate approach led by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), in conjunction with the Ministry for Health (MFH) and the Ministry for Finance and Employment (MFE). This approach included assessing the implementation of Government's policies and public health guidelines within the sectoral Ministries. Secondly, the NAO selected two Ministries as case studies for its assessment of the implementation of Government's response to ensure business continuity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. These two case studies included

¹ The role of public service and public servants during the COVID-19 pandemic (un.org).

the Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights (MSPC) and the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR).² Figure 1 illustrates this approach.

Figure 1: NAO’s approach to the COVID-19 business continuity within the public administration



1.1.5 Furthermore, the NAO also considered the role of the Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) in ensuring business continuity both within the Agency, as well as throughout Government. Generally, robust, reliable and modern Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure within Government was already in place, which greatly facilitated the extent to which public entities could ensure the continuity of their operations.

1.1.6 MSPC and MEYR were selected by NAO to assess the implementation of COVID-19 business continuity within the public administration because of the services of utmost importance which they provide to the Maltese citizen. Therefore, the risks, within these two Ministries, of failing to adopt a swift, efficient, and effective response to any disruptions brought about by the pandemic were very high, potentially causing a serious negative impact on the significant number of citizens who depend on these public services.

1.2 Government’s approach to COVID-19 was two-tiered

1.2.1 As stated in the Preliminary Review, at OPM level, expertise was drafted into two main committees, namely a strategic and an operational one. The strategic committee chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Health focused on health-related matters. The second

² For the purpose of this audit, the NAO is referring to these Ministries using the nomenclatures as at April 2022.

committee, which is responsible for medium to long-term planning, is chaired by the Principal Permanent Secretary and is composed of a number of Ministerial representatives and entities. From this committee stem a number of working groups which are meeting on a regular basis to tackle issues ranging from communication, economic and commercial activity, to essential services, transport, and others. Moreover, at the strategic level, Malta has been engaging in bi-lateral and multi-lateral discussions, predominantly with the EU and its Member States. These discussions not only contributed towards the compilation of strategic measures relating to the pandemic but also led to the co-financing of various COVID-19 mitigating measures.

- 1.2.2 When the first cases of COVID-19 emerged in Malta, MFH responded to the threat based on emerging information on this new virus. Global scientific knowledge on the COVID-19 virus was lacking, which meant that public health advice was not available immediately and had to be updated throughout the pandemic. MFH mainly followed guidelines from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), as well as, to a lesser extent, guidelines from the World Health Organisation (WHO). Moreover, through an informal network of international experts with whom MFH officials normally interact as part of their daily work, it was possible to regularly accede to updated information and lived experiences abroad and to engage in interactive consultations with colleagues. These experiences and consultations were vital to shape the national response particularly in the critical stages between March and December 2020. The Health authorities had outlined an *Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan* in 2006. This was updated by the Superintendence of Public health in 2019 – *Updated Influenza Pandemic Plan*.
- 1.2.3 MFE is responsible for taking financial decisions to approve financial requests from line Ministries to ensure the continuity of their operations throughout the pandemic. MFE is also responsible for making funds available to finance Government's COVID-19 response.
- 1.2.4 OPM, MFH and MFE were also responsible for communicating the corporate direction to the underlying sectoral Ministries.

1.3 Higher public expenditure in times of crisis creates additional risks for good governance and accountability

- 1.3.1 The Preliminary Report, "*Preliminary review: NAO's role in reviewing Government's measures relating to the COVID-19 pandemic*" together with other reports published by this Office, in the "*Report by the Auditor General on the Public Accounts 2020*" (on measures mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic) noted that during a crisis, there are higher risks to governance in terms of accountability, transparency, compliance, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness. Decisions must be made quickly, otherwise the fallout from not taking them could be devastating, ultimately exacerbating the negative impact of the pandemic. Furthermore, Government's COVID-19-related expenditure and its socio-economic impact is substantial. Furthermore, this audit sought to explore the challenges Government had to face, including those related to aggressive competition with foreign Governments for the same resources,

which were aimed to appropriately deal with the pandemic in a timely manner and to ensure business continuity.

Key
Facts

1.3.2 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the public service not only had to ensure business continuity with minimal disruption but also had to minimise health risks for critical personnel who were physically present at the workplace. During the period when the number of active COVID-19 cases peaked, remote working was not a possibility for everyone. With the exception of a two-week period, Government decided to open public schools for the 2020-2021 scholastic year. Risks of viral transmission within schools and into the community were high however, strict measures were put in place in schools (mitigation measures and robust contact tracing) to safeguard continued schooling and the evidence is that in-school transmission of COVID-19 was very minimal with few small clusters in schools.

Executive
Summary

Chapter 1

1.3.3 MEYR, in conjunction with MFH, adopted a number of public health measures to prevent and contain the spread of the virus within schools. In case of failure, the impact on the community at large as well as on the national economy would have been devastating. Other risks pertaining to the educational sector included not having enough physical space in schools for all students and teachers, whilst observing social distancing rules; not having enough educational staff; not having enough ICT equipment; having vulnerable students and teachers following or delivering their lessons virtually; ensuring minimal human contact at the start and end of school day to avoid mixing of cohorts, as well as during the breaks; diminished extracurricular educational programmes and outings; communication with all stakeholders involved; and satisfying the needs and requests of all stakeholders involved including unions.

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

1.3.4 As regards MSPC, few arrangements to its modus operandi were required when the pandemic hit. Furthermore, most staff within the social security department already had teleworking agreements dating before the pandemic. With respect to this Ministry, risks were mostly related to late payments; threats to cyber security; mishandling beneficiaries' personal data, as well as ensuring that all beneficiaries have access to customer care, including computer-illiterate beneficiaries.

Chapter 4

1.4 Audit objectives

Chapter 5

1.4.1 The main focus of this audit was to determine the extent to which Government ensured continuity of operations/service in conjunction with COVID-19 measures in a cost effective and efficient manner. Towards this end, this performance audit sought to reach the following objectives:

Chapter 6

- Assessing whether Government departments had the appropriate plans and infrastructure to facilitate business continuity.
- Determining if ICT support was in place to facilitate the efficient implementation of business continuity measures across the public service.

Appendix

- Evaluating whether business continuity measures resulted in the attainment of pre-determined outputs and outcomes.
- Determining if mechanisms were in place to identify the lessons learned through the business continuity measures.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 The attainment of the aforementioned objectives entailed a number of methodological approaches. These involved the following:

- Adherence to ISSAIs** – The audit was carried out in accordance with the Standard for Performance Auditing, International Standards of Supreme Audit Institutions (ISSAI) 3000.
- Documentation review** – This included a review of preparedness and contingency plans, implementation plans and manuals, documentation on Government’s COVID-19-measures, circulars, human resources policies, risk assessments, minutes, and correspondence by electronic mail. The NAO is satisfied that all such documents and plans were made available to its audit team.
- Semi-structured interviews** – These interviews enabled the collation of qualitative data, which in turn was used to corroborate information arising from other sources and approaches. To this end, the NAO interviewed key officials within MEYR, MSPC, OPM, MFE, MFH and MITA.
- Data analysis** – Data was collected and analysed both for scoping purposes to carry out the comparative analysis between MEYR and MSPC and to determine the impact of the pandemic on the sampled benefits.
- Survey** – The survey enabled the collection of feedback on the experience of educational and administrative staff in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.5.2 This performance audit will not comment on the public health policies issued as this does not fall within the remit of this Office.

1.6 Report structure

1.6.1 Following this introductory Chapter, the Report proceeds to discuss the following:

- Chapter 2 discusses whether strategic and corporate direction was provided by OPM, MFH and MFE to facilitate business continuity within the public service.
- Chapter 3 discusses whether ICT support was in place to facilitate the efficient implementation of business continuity measures across the public service. This Chapter includes input from NAO's IT audit team that assisted the performance audit team carrying out this audit.
- Chapter 4 evaluates whether business continuity measures resulted in the attainment of pre-determined outputs and outcomes within MSPC.
- Chapter 5 evaluates whether business continuity measures resulted in the attainment of pre-determined outputs and outcomes within MEYR.
- Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of this assignment.

1.6.2 The overall conclusions and recommendations related to this performance audit are presented in this Report's Executive Summary from page 11 to 13.

Key
Facts

Executive
Summary

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Appendix

Chapter 2 | Government's plans and infrastructure to facilitate business continuity

2.1 Introduction

- 2.1.1** To a large extent, during the pandemic, Government responded adequately and effectively to ensure business continuity within the public administration while limiting the spread of COVID-19. From a management's perspective, this necessitated the synchronisation of the planning function, the optimisation and in certain cases, the upgrading of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure to facilitate business continuity whilst assuring protection. The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) collaborated with the Ministry for Health (MFH) and the Ministry for Finance and Employment (MFE) to develop Government's response to ensure business continuity within the public administration during the pandemic. MFH oversaw the introduction of public health measures to ensure business continuity whilst protecting the local population from the impact of the virus. MFE was responsible for the financing aspect of Government's response to COVID-19.
- 2.1.2** The Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) also had a critical supporting role to enable remote working and a high standard of Information Technology (IT) infrastructure throughout the public service. Prior to the pandemic, MITA had already prepared for a scenario requiring non-critical staff within this organisation to work from home. Consequently, MITA was able to provide the required support and assistance to the public administration to facilitate business continuity throughout the pandemic. The next Chapter discusses MITA's role in detail.
- 2.1.3** Early in the pandemic, national public health authorities established the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Government had to continuously revise this response as the COVID-19 situation was changing fast and public health authorities were continuously seeking data and scientific information. In these changing circumstances, it was paramount that public health authorities react swiftly and adapt measures according to current scientific evidence. This followed scientific evidence and guidance documents from international and European public health bodies which were adapted to the local scenario. Public health officials participated in regular meetings organised by the European Union (EU) Health Security Committee and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).
- 2.1.4** OPM, MFH and MFE worked very closely with line Ministries to ensure business continuity within the public service. Government's infrastructure was to a large extent sufficiently robust and secure, requiring minor adaptations, which greatly facilitated the adoption of extensive teleworking policies across the public service. Policies and guidelines were generally

communicated clearly and swiftly both within Government as well as between Government departments and entities. Implementations and monitoring relating to these measures fell within the responsibility of the Permanent Secretaries at the respective Ministries.

2.1.5 Against this background, this Chapter discusses the governance mechanisms in place at OPM, MFH and MFE. This will be presented in two major sections, namely to:

- i Plan and implement measures to enable business continuity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii Monitor and enforce public health safety measures intended to protect public and employees' health to enable business continuity.

2.2 OPM, MFH and MFE played leading roles to facilitate business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic

2.2.1 Business continuity within the public administration is dependent on strategic planning as well as having the appropriate operational infrastructure in place. An essential feature of this performance audit was to determine the extent to which the Public Service upheld the principles of good governance in mitigating the impact of the pandemic. To this end, this performance audit reviewed the practices adopted by Ministries and entities entrusted with providing the strategic direction to facilitate business continuity namely in terms of transparency, responsibility and accountability.

OPM led the strategic aspect of business continuity across the public service

2.2.2 OPM fulfilled a leading role in coordinating Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In accordance with the audit criteria established, this performance audit also determined the degree to which good public governance prevailed in the face of the pandemic.

2.2.3 To this end this review noted the following:

- i. **Coordinating:** In line with its responsibilities as a central department, OPM assumed the lead role in coordinating between Ministries to ascertain centralised direction which facilitated and coordinated decision-making.

OPM's coordination was facilitated through two committees, which although mutually exclusive had interdependent roles. These committees were forums for expert discussion, decision making and communicating decisions to line Ministries. The two committees were the cabinet strategic committee and the operational committee.³ The cabinet strategic committee was chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Health

³ Brief on COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan.

while the operational committee was chaired by the Principal Permanent Secretary. The latter committee was responsible for the medium to long-term planning and comprised ministerial representatives and entities to address essential services such as trade, food security, transport, and telecommunications.

- ii. **Planning and championing initiatives:** OPM also fulfilled a critical role in championing and accelerating the completion of the mainstreaming process to deliver public services.

A case in point relates to the establishment of the on-line portal 'servizz.gov'. Through this service, personal customer care/service interface was mitigated by the availability of online services or call centre facilities.

Similarly, OPM was instrumental in facilitating and extending teleworking and remote working throughout the public service. This arrangement was in place for all public administration employees except for front liners and other highly critical personnel who could not perform their professional duties remotely. In March 2020, the Principal Permanent Secretary issued a circular to all Permanent Secretaries within the various Ministries. Directive 13⁴ issued on 13th March 2020 and its subsequent amendments, enabled Permanent Secretaries to approve temporary requests for teleworking in those cases where the public officer can continue fulfilling their duties remotely. This initiative was complemented by the introduction of remote working hubs, which could be utilised by public officers during remote working.

- iii. **Transparency and accountability:** A fundamental aspect of good public governance relates to transparency and accountability. This performance audit determined that OPM generally fulfilled criteria related to these two principles.

The NAO assessed the degree to which the principle of transparency was upheld through the maintenance of minutes of major decisions undertaken by the two committees referred to in paragraph 2.2.3.i. As a sample, this performance audit reviewed minutes related to the provision of food, water and resources as well as other meetings related to transport and IT support. Although such a sample is not statistically representative, it provided a sound indicator that OPM maintained audit trails regarding critical issues.

In some cases, OPM upheld the principles of transparency through reports commissioned or compiled by experts within the public service. This performance audit can cite the Enemalta and Water Services Corporation Contingency Plans as well as the Report regarding the Status and Sustainable Availability of Food Imports as examples of such reports.

OPM also embraced the concept of accountability. Key to the upholding of this principle was the establishment of clear responsibilities of players. Examples in this regard relate to the terms of reference of the two committees, and the role and function of the members

⁴ Directive 13.pdf (gov.mt)

therein. In addition, OPM circulars such as Directive 13, allocates responsibilities for implementing and monitoring pandemic related directives to Permanent Secretaries in charge of Ministries. Such circumstances establish clear lines of accountability, which contribute to good public governance.

- iv. **Communication:** Apart from discussing, devising and communicating pandemic related directives and guidelines, OPM formally informed Ministries and stakeholders of policy direction through circulars addressed to senior public service management. Directive 13 is an example in this regard.

MFH's leading responsibility related to the drafting of health policies, guidelines and legal notices

2.2.4 MFH's communication with line Ministries and Government's departments was generally effective and timely. This Ministry's directives and guidelines were based on scientific evidence and considered international and European health bodies as well as the local prevailing circumstances.

2.2.5 This performance audit approached MFH's role in a similar manner as that adopted for OPM – that is to determine the extent to which this Ministry embraced good governance principles in executing its role through predetermined criteria. The following refers:

- i. **Strategic Planning:** In 2006, MFH prepared a contingency plan for an Influenza Pandemic. This plan was updated in 2019. MFH used basic principles from this plan to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to fact that the virus was not influenza, the fast-developing public health emergency on the ground and the limited scientific knowledge on the COVID-19 early in the pandemic, the response was adopted in line with emerging scientific evidence.

Policies adopted by MFH also sought to provide an effective and efficient response to the developing public health crisis. During the period from March 2020 to March 2021, MFH issued various measures which were regulated through various legal notices, which mainly regulated the use of public places, mass gatherings, the banning of travel to certain countries, conditions for entry to Malta and the obligation of mandatory isolation of positive cases and quarantine of those persons that were in close contact with a positive case. In addition, standards were issued to outline mitigation measures for various establishments and services. Such measures were adopted in accordance with escalation/de-escalation as required along the waves of the pandemic.

- ii. **Leadership:** MFH spearheaded efforts to control the impact of the pandemic through various non-pharmaceutical measures, providing the clinical care for COVID cases at primary and secondary care, and a planned roll out of COVID-19 vaccines. This led to a very high vaccination rate amongst the local population. This initiative formed part of

Government's strategy to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The first COVID-19 vaccines were available for front-liners in the health sector as early as December 2020.

- iii. **Coordination:** In the initial phase of the pandemic, the Superintendence of Public Health (SPH) established a COVID-19 public health response team bringing together public health expertise in Malta. The team comprised a Senior Advisory Group (SAG), which recommends public health policies based on the advice of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, a European Union (EU) agency aimed at strengthening Europe's defences against infectious diseases. The SAG also followed closely developments within the World Health Organisation (WHO). Moreover, through an informal network of international experts with whom MFH officials normally interact as part of their daily work, it was possible to regularly accede to updated information and lived experiences abroad and to engage in interactive consultations with colleagues. These experiences and consultations were vital to shape the national response particularly in the critical stages between March and December 2020.

MFH's coordination efforts were also evident in the applicability of guidelines emanating from the SAG on the basis of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) or WHO advice to the local context. To this end, MFH held discussions within the COVID-19 Senior Advisory Group where policy changes were considered. These discussions then transcended to other Ministries, as was deemed necessary, to enable business continuity. Cases in point relate to the Ministries responsible for tourism and education.

- iv. **Efficiency and effectiveness:** This performance audit encountered various limitations in evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness which prevailed within the MFH during the period under review. These limitations mainly related to establishing evaluating criteria related to these elements of good governance. A case in point relates to determining efficiency of operations such as assessing the period taken to implement advice from WHO and ECDC. Since a number of variables – such as the prevailing local trends relating to the pandemic, resource availability, cultural aspects and scientific evidence relating to the local scenario, any unweighted criteria which would have been developed relating to the implementing period would not have served its purpose. As stated in Paragraph 1.4.2, the NAO's mandate does not extend to the merits of policy itself but to the effectiveness of its implementation and results attained.

Consequently, discussions revealed that SPH monitored their efficiency and effectiveness through the results being attained in mitigating the effects of the pandemic. Indicators in this regard included positivity rate, hospital admissions, the number of Intensive Care Unit cases and vaccination coverage. These KPIs were monitored regularly and actions taken accordingly. Moreover, SPH used age-specific data which helped to shape advice, response and standards. However, this approach had its limitations as key performance indicators against which to benchmark performance could not – and it was not practical – to develop. To this effect, the NAO was constrained to consider opinions expressed by experts in the

field, which was generally positive. Statistical data illustrated that the implementation of policy measures and guidelines was timely and effective and conducive to business continuity within Ministries, Government departments and entities.

To varying degrees, business continuity including within the public administration was dependent on the availability of hospitals and health clinics to treat COVID-19 patients. Health experts deemed the implementation of MFH policy as efficient and effective when introducing measures aimed at ensuring the safety of patients and hospital staff.⁵ The Central Procurement Supplies Unit (CPSU) within MFH had to purchase enough medical equipment and medicinal for the public hospitals and clinics to cater for the evolving scenario without precedence. The CPSU also had to purchase hand sanitisers, thermometers, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), on behalf of other Ministries and entities such as homes for the elderly and residences for disability. Stocks of PPE were diminishing fast worldwide, which led to significant competition between countries to purchase as much of this material as they could. Obtaining such stocks in such challenging circumstances proved to be extremely problematic for all countries, not least for the smallest EU Member State.

Ensuring patient and staff safety measures included different levels of COVID-19 screening and restrictions prior to seeking treatment at the hospital or attending some medical appointment. On the other hand, restrictions as well as the change in hospital and health centres protocols effected elective surgery and some outpatient clinics – the latter in both hospitals and health centres. This is considered as the opportunity cost which enabled the hospital and health centres to operate as efficiently and effectively as possible as well as to near capacity as the prevailing circumstances permitted. The NAO gauged the effectiveness of this practice through the avoidance of complete lockdowns and enabling many business sectors, including the public administration to continue with their operations.

Business continuity was enabled through the vaccination programme. By July 2021, 70 per cent of the local population had received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccine; a statistic which implied the reaching of herd immunity. Up to 22nd August 2022, 44 and 89 per cent of the children aged five to eleven years as well as two years and over received the primary schedule of the COVID-19 vaccine. Moreover, 99.6 per cent of the population over 18 years that had their COVID-19 vaccine, received the first booster dose. The second booster that is available for people over 60 years of age was administered to 84 per cent of the eligible population.⁶ When compared to other European Countries, the statistics portrayed in this paragraph show that on a per capita basis, Malta's vaccination programme was delivered in a timely manner to most of the population.

- v. **Economy:** Although economic considerations are at the heart of good public governance, in times of emergency, Governments are to certain degrees rendered as price takers. This was also the case with MFH. Paragraph 2.2.11.iv will expand the discussion to the economic governance related to the pandemic.

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33313859/> as at 17 February 2022.

⁶ Source: SPH

vi. **Communication:** The preceding paragraphs have already referred to the guidance issued by international and European bodies about the pandemic.

2.2.6 MFH's communication was critical and needed to be clear and timely to ensure that public health notices were brought to the attention of stakeholders. To this end, MFH, including SPH, used various mediums to communicate guidance and directives. The Ministry and SPH resorted to frequent press conferences and briefings. These facilitated the communication of information about the pandemic to the public.

2.2.7 The frequent press conferences and briefings were usually the means to further explain written guidelines and directives. Business continuity was enabled through various public health notices communicated by SPH. An example of this relates to safety measures that different businesses, including the public service, were obliged to follow. This included social and physical distancing, ventilation, sanitisation, as well contact tracing measures.

2.2.8 During the period under review, from the beginning of the pandemic up to March 2021, SPH and the Minister responsible for Health, who are empowered by law to issue obligatory public health safety directions through legal notices, issued over 140 legal notices, following cabinet discussion and approval. These addressed topics such as the closure and opening of schools, businesses in various economic sectors, public gatherings, isolation and quarantine measures, travel measures and the wearing of masks. Such measures were generally intended for a whole range of economic activities, which also included the public sector.

2.2.9 The SPH also communicated the measures, standards and guidelines to the Ministries concerned and published them on its website, which it kept up to date, to ensure public access to updated information. During the development of various policies and standards, SPH held numerous meetings, not only with line Ministries, Government entities and regulatory agencies such as MEYR, but also with multiple stakeholders, business representatives and associations, unions and other constituted bodies and professional associations and NGOs, to ensure a highest possible rate of policy implementation and compliance. The educational sector presented a particular challenge for public health authorities. To this end, SPH held regular meetings with MEYR and several other stakeholders including trade unions and parents' associations, to support them with technical advice and to provide and issue public health guidelines that consider the specific needs and challenges of the educational sector. Education was always given priority in terms of continuity and all measures were taken to limit any school closures to the minimum required. Matters related to the operations of MEYR throughout the pandemic will be discussed in Chapter 5.

i. **Transparency:** The urgency of implementing measures to mitigate the effects of the pandemic are acknowledged. Nonetheless, it remains imperative that the players involved retain robust audit trails regarding the decision-making process and changes in operational protocols. Audit trails are conducive to transparency and to ensure that there is a record to elicit the lessons that could be learned and implemented in a post-pandemic environment.

These lessons relate to the possibility of retaining for the future, measures which were deemed efficient and effective.

However, this review noted that MFH and other entities did not have all the minutes of the meetings which were held throughout the pandemic, though the outcome of the decision meetings can be elicited through working documents, SOPs, public health guidelines and Legal Notices issued. Nonetheless, this situation diminishes audit trails and transparency of decision making.

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The Ministry for Finance and Employment facilitated the transfer of financial resources to Ministries and permitted direct orders to expedite procurement of pandemic related equipment

Chapter 1

2.2.10 In accordance with its role, MFE assumed financial leadership with respect to funding pandemic-related budget. This Ministry's role enabled business continuity on a number of fronts, namely by making funds available for measures aimed at mitigating the economic impact of the pandemic. From the beginning of the pandemic, up to the end of 2021, this Ministry was instrumental in the funding arrangements amounting to over €1.7billion to implement a spectrum of financial aid to many economic sectors. Moreover, this Ministry also provided direction and guidance to enable Governmental entities to operate with the least possible disruption during this time of emergency. In such circumstances, MFE had to find an equilibrium between urgency and competitive procurement to facilitate business continuity in a difficult environment without compromising good governance principles.

Chapter 2

2.2.11 Similarly to the assessments carried out at OPM and MFH, this performance audit evaluated this Ministry's contribution towards business continuity in the public service through predetermined criteria involving principles and elements of good governance. The following refers:

Chapter 3

- i. **Availability of financial resources:** In March 2020, the European Commission through press release, " COVID-19 Commission sets out European coordinated responses to counter the economic impact of the Corona virus" recommended to the Council the suspension of the European fiscal discipline rules to allow national Governments to take financial and economic measures to help alleviate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic, which meant that the Maltese Government could allocate more funds to mitigate the pandemic than under normal circumstances. Furthermore, in September 2021, through the Recovery and Resilience Plan, the EU made available a total of €316.4 million in grants to support Malta in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

MFE was able to increase its budgetary spending following a decision by the European Commission to suspend for a temporary period strict fiscal discipline rules to allow national Governments to finance effective and timely responses to the socio-economic crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Chapter 6

Appendix

Government, after taking into considerations various factors, used income from the Individual Investor Programme (IIP) to amongst other bolster its COVID-19-related public expenditure. In total, up to December 2021, €193.7 million were used from the IIP to help Government finance its COVID-19 response plan by investing in Malta Government Stocks and treasury bills. Under normal circumstances, seventy per cent of the IIP-related income is placed in the National Development and Social Fund, a sovereign wealth fund, whilst thirty per cent is normally transferred to Government's consolidated fund. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage transferred to the consolidated fund was temporarily raised to eighty per cent.

ii. Economic considerations related to funding and public administration procurement:

The rapid response of the public administration was critical to enable business continuity with the least disruption possible. To this effect, it was necessary to shorten lead times relating to funding requests or direct procurement. This necessitated that funds and direct procurement requests were made available without detailed supporting studies. Due to the materiality of funds involved, such a situation was not ideal, but the socio-economic benefits were rightly prioritised in lieu of the existing finance related protocols. Nonetheless, MFE embraced the principles of good public governance as decision making involved expert input, approvals from cabinet, discussions with OPM and other Ministries as well as, on occasions, the EU Commission.

iii. Competitive procurement:

The sudden worldwide demand for urgently needed equipment, supplies and services to enable the public administration to continue with its operations during the pandemic restricted the MFE from operating in accordance to established protocols. The Public Procurement Regulations stipulate that public entities can seek approvals from MFE to effect direct procurement when urgent or emergencies arise, or procurement can only be affected through specialised sources. Within this context, the public procurement regulations permit Government entities to procure directly from suppliers, without the need to seek quotations, issue calls for expression of interests or to embark on a competitive tendering process.

MFE invoked these legislative provisions within the public procurement regulations, particularly in the early days of the pandemic. Cases in point relate to protective clothing (such as PPEs), ventilators to be used in intensive care units, COVID-19 vaccines to enable the fastest possible rollout and coverage, IT equipment to facilitate remote working as well as equipment to enable schools to operate in accordance with health protocols. The pandemic and the urgency within which service and equipment were required to enable the public administration to continue with its operations with the least disruptions possible, at times rendered Government as a price taker.

2.3 Central and line Ministries as well as other appointed bodies monitored the implementation of COVID-19 related directives and guidelines

- 2.3.1 A key management function which is conducive to good governance relates to monitoring. The monitoring function associated with COVID-19 mitigating measures was carried out at three main levels. Departments who had a leading role during the pandemic, namely OPM, MFH and MFE performed the monitoring function at the strategic level. Permanent Secretaries were responsible for overseeing the implementation of Government's public health measures within the remaining Ministries. Enforcement of pandemic measures was undertaken through delegated authority provided by the Public Health Act, the Environmental Health Directorate, Police force, the Local Enforcement System Agency (LESA), Transport Malta (TM) and the Enforcement Directorate within the Ministry of Tourism.
- 2.3.2 OPM, MFH and MFE monitored the implementation of COVID-19 mitigation measures from a strategic perspective. That is, they received and monitored regular operational and financial reports from line Ministries.
- 2.3.3 **OPM:** As the lead Ministry, OPM held regular meetings with line Ministries and stakeholders. As confirmed by meetings' minutes and agendas, this Ministry also chaired meetings of the operational committee about the ongoing trends and impacts of the pandemic.
- 2.3.4 **MFH:** In addition, MFH monitored the COVID-19 situation through a number of fronts. To this end, MFH monitored closely daily statistics regarding the number of COVID positive cases though the positivity rate, hospitalised cases, intensive care occupancy, and age-specific data. These factors helped to shape advice, response and standards and their implication to public health as well as the operational aspects of Malta's hospitals and clinics. Moreover, MFH also had responsibilities for the COVID helpline, testing facilities, case management and contact tracing, enforcement and communication which sought to minimise the spread of the virus and enabled this Ministry to provide guidance to those workplaces, including the public service. These functions were critical to enable business continuity within the public service as such monitoring enabled the compilation of new policies and operational protocols.
- 2.3.5 At the micro level, Permanent Secretaries were responsible to monitor and enforce directives issued by OPM, MFH and MFE. To this end, this performance audit carried out two case studies relating to MSPC and MEYR. Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss in detail the monitoring and enforcement initiatives undertaken at these two Ministries.
- 2.3.6 **MFE:** This Ministry constantly monitored Government's financial position. The pandemic did not dismantle the monitoring mechanisms used in the pre-pandemic phase. MFE did not encounter monitoring-related difficulties as regards the amount of taxpayers' money spent to finance Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the significant influence of a number of unquantifiable variables at play, MFE could only use data collected through monitoring as an indicator since in the uncertain environment brought about by the pandemic rendered financial projections as a more complex task.

2.3.7 Monitoring and enforcement by other public entities: SPH within MFH delegated the authority to carry out inspections related to COVID-19 measures to the Environmental Health Directorate, Police Force, LESA, TM and the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA). However, these initiatives did not cover adherence of public health safety directives in most workplaces, including the public sector. Monitoring and enforcement by these entities mainly related to the wearing of masks by the public in outdoor and public spaces and the inspections carried out in accommodation and catering establishments. Furthermore, a judgement by the Courts of Law⁷ ruled that no local council, regional committee or agency for local enforcement had the power to enforce or commence proceedings against any person accused of breaching COVID quarantine rules. In its ruling, the Court noted that, although the quarantine regulations fell within the competence of the commissioners for justice, they were not listed among offences community officers could enforce. LESA has since appealed this ruling.

2.4 Conclusion

2.4.1 The discussion within this Chapter portrayed a situation whereby despite the emergency brought about by the pandemic, the public service generally continued with its core operations with varying levels of disruption. The evidence elicited through this performance audit also showed that generally the leading Ministries – which were the focal point of the discussion herein – embraced the principles and elements of good governance.

2.4.2 OPM, MFH and MFE were the main players providing strategic direction and resources to ascertain that the public service continued with its operations to the benefit of society, in terms of service accessibility, public health safety, and financial measures and arrangements to mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

2.4.3 Without going into the merits of policies, these three Ministries were able to respond rapidly in the prevailing emergency but still managed to embrace the principles of accountability, transparency, planning and monitoring. These good governance principles necessitated the championing of initiatives and leadership, effective communication with all stake holders and coordination of tasks.

⁷ Court of Magistrates (Malta) as a Court of Criminal Judicature Magistrate: Dr. Victor G. Axiak B.A., LL.D., Dip. Tax, LOCAL ENFORCEMENT SYSTEM AGENCY V. PAVLA STEJSKALOVA (ID. 148365A), 20 January 2022.

Chapter 3 | The role of MITA to ensure business continuity in the public administration

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Appendix

3.1 Background

3.1.1 The Malta Information Technology Agency (MITA) is the public entity vested with the responsibility to provide Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure, systems and services to Government.

3.1.2 Through the direction of the Ministry for the Economy and Industry (MEI)⁸, MITA collaborates with the Office of the Principal Permanent Secretary and Ministry Chief Information Officers (CIOs) to attain its mandated strategies and assigned projects.⁹ MITA thus operates within a defined national ICT strategy, prioritising national ICT targets and embraces open standards and technologies as a matter of policy, to build, nurture and sustain excellent industry relations both locally and internationally.

3.1.3 MITA, being the arm of Government ICT services delivery, has cultivated institutional competences for the appropriate governance of ICT implementation. This is coupled with the application of industry best practices in areas including project management, business solution definition, systems development, cloud services, information security and privacy and risk management structures. MITA also implemented policies, processes and procedures to safeguard the appropriate governance of the Government ICT landscape.

3.1.4 The Agency operates a data centre, hosting the main Government information systems and associated data, and a wide-area network, which is the backbone of the Government's IT systems and services. The Agency designs, develops, implements and maintains shared digital platforms and information systems, to enable the public administration to continually improve its services.

3.1.5 To strengthen the interface with the clients, MITA adopts the principle that every employee is representing the organisation. This is facilitated through improvements to the Agency's internal processes and systems, and by strengthening the relations with all the relevant stakeholders.¹⁰

3.1.6 Thus, MITA's purpose is to:

- i. Serve as the central driver of Government's ICT policy and strategy.
- ii. Deliver and manage information systems and services across Government to enable reform and innovation in public service delivery.

⁸ As from April 2022, MITA falls with the remit of OPM.

⁹ <https://mita.gov.mt/about-us/>

¹⁰ MITA Strategy 2021-2023 - MITA (gov.mt)

- iii. Provide efficient, effective and secure ICT infrastructure and services to Government.
- iv. Encourage the application and take-up of ICTs in the wider economy¹¹.

3.1.7 Finally, the Agency participates in national, European Union (EU) and wider international groups to represent Malta's position on various ICT matters and brings about changes in order that the country benefits from the most recent digital developments. In the past few years, MITA has worked on several strategies and major initiatives to introduce new practices and to help the public administration embrace new technologies. MITA has been at the forefront in advocating and bringing about change and will continue to serve as a strategic partner for Government in introducing new technologies to further transform public services, rendering them more efficient and effective.

3.2 MITA was well prepared, in terms of business continuity, in the eventuality of the introduction of mitigation measures

3.2.1 When the global COVID-19 pandemic started to spread across mainland Europe, MITA started to plan and discuss internally how they could respond in a flexible way to varying levels of severity of the pandemic. A "situation team"¹² was set-up in this regard, with the remit to assist the organisation to plan proactive measures to contain, or rather, to avoid any plausible risk to the health of MITA employees, while ensuring business continuity.

3.2.2 For this reason, MITA allocated the necessary time and effort to plan and think of possible scenarios and be prepared to refine its business response in the event of a possible COVID-19 outbreak in Malta. The main objectives were to assess and where necessary simulate how MITA could be impacted. MITA tested its abilities to ensure that the provision of client services remain operational, possibly seamlessly with normal business operations, should MITA employees be instructed to work remotely.

3.2.3 MITA proactively initiated a number of simulations within its internal departments to assess their readiness for any situation that may arise, to ensure business continuity and safeguard the employees' health. To this extent, every Head of Department was asked to maintain a Simulation Log Register to:

- i. Identify employees (and substitute officers) who are critical in retaining Government's IT service management and ensuring the upkeep of the same service.
- ii. Carry out simulations and identify/address any issues that may arise should all employees be required to work from home.
- iii. Draft a report with the findings/issues encountered and any related actions that may be required.

¹¹ MITA-Strategy.pdf (gov.mt)

¹² The situation team was a task force setup by MITA headed by the Executive Chairman and included other members of MITA's senior management.

- 3.2.4 In the eventuality of a total lockdown, MITA had made all the necessary plans to continue operating and supporting critical infrastructure services and client operations. This ensured that the Government core operations services, such as the availability of the Malta Government network (MAGNET), email and Internet services, client service call support, infrastructure and systems operations, and the monitoring of critical infrastructure against cyber security threats, remain operational.
- 3.2.5 Whilst all the above was underway, MITA employees were requested to commute daily to the office, carrying with them their laptop and ensure that proper access to online office resources is maintained for business continuity, whilst prioritising employees' health. In addition, the Ministry CIOs (and also those within the public entities) were being advised to ensure employee preparedness to work remotely. This was undertaken within extremely tight timeframes.
- 3.2.6 In the meantime, the Human Resources department within MITA issued regular internal communications to its personnel in line with Health measures that were being taken. These covered flexible working arrangements for all MITA employees, including those who did not have previous remote or teleworking arrangements before the first COVID-19 cases were registered in Malta. As a result, some of the internal policies, particularly those related to flexible work arrangements, were relaxed for a limited time period, to ensure that health and safety measures are maintained according to the pandemic situation.
- 3.2.7 Given how things were evolving with the COVID-19 pandemic across Europe, MITA was expecting an increase in the demand on some services operated by the Agency, for instance a sudden increase in the workload on MITA's Service Call Centre, due to a number of new requests for teleworking. To address this increase in demand, the staff complement of critical service functions were increased to cover the added workload. Additional shifts were also introduced to extend the service provision beyond the normal day operations and employees providing critical services were asked to report for work on different days/shifts.
- 3.2.8 When the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Malta on 7th March, things started to evolve quickly and by mid-March, the Government in line with the Health authorities, announced a number of measures including, the closure of all schools, university and childcare centres, a ban on all sea and air travel (except for cargo), and the closure of non-essential retail amongst others measures. Social distancing, the use of sanitizers and facemasks, amongst other precautions, were necessary to reduce contagion. The Government had strongly encouraged or mandated minimising physical presence at work, and workers from both the private and public administration to work from home.
- 3.2.9 By the end of March 2020, the majority of MITA employees were working from home, with the exception of only a few personnel who operate in critical business areas, such as the MITA Data Centre in St Venera.¹³ The above can be attributed to the efforts of all management and

¹³ The MITA Data Centre in St Venera hosts the core infrastructure and the critical Government ICT operations, monitoring and supporting services. The facility is operated 24x7 through a mix of personnel working on day duties and on shift basis. During periods where mitigation measures were introduced to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus whilst some monitoring functions were performed remotely, only a few personnel had to be on site to perform duties which required physical interventions.

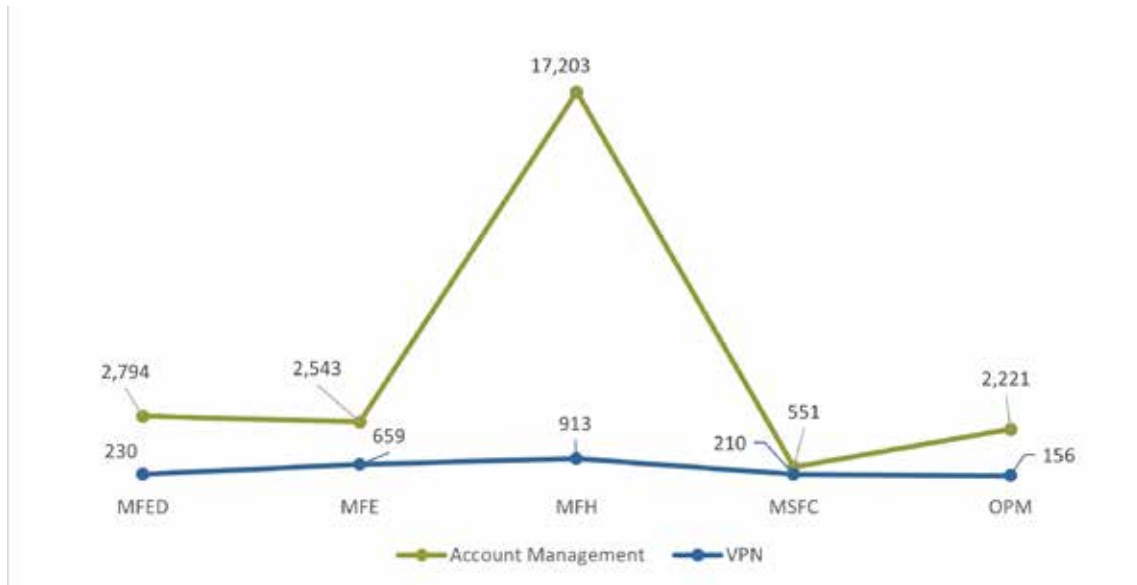
personnel within MITA who went through all these simulations and preparations over the past two months, in the eventuality of a complete lockdown, and through the investments made in its infrastructure and information systems.

3.3 A sudden increase in the number of requests received for the provision of services during the COVID-19 pandemic

- 3.3.1** The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic caused changes in mindset, attitude, direction and practices that will remain well past the pandemic. A clear effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on employees was reflected in the rapid implementation of remote working practices. In fact, Malta has seen an increase in remote working since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic using tools such as videoconferencing (Microsoft Teams or Zoom), cloud services and virtual private networks (VPNs). Apart from the public administration, many organisations started to embrace flexible modes of work for their employees to make a relatively seamless switch to working from home without impinging on productivity.
- 3.3.2** In light of this, MITA was expecting an increase in demand on some services operated by the Agency, for instance the load on the Service Call Centre due to the sudden rise in the number of requests from its employees and Government departments for teleworking. To address this increase in demand, MITA shifted some of its resources to service the increased workload in certain sections. Additional shifts were also introduced to extend service provision beyond normal day operations. The increase in operational staff in these sections was necessary to ensure business continuity and to cover possibility of outbreak affecting employees.
- 3.3.3** The concept of teleworking wasn't triggered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but was already established across Government since 2001, as a family-friendly measure to provide the flexibility required by employees to establish a better balance between their personal and working lives. This was possible by having the appropriate technology, so that the employee could access information systems and data stored remotely.
- 3.3.4** When the first cases of COVID-19 were being reported, the Office of the Principal Permanent Secretary issued a memo (Directive 13) instructing all the Ministry's Permanent Secretary to accept as much as possible all requests for teleworking to ensure the health and safety of its public officers and minimise the spread of COVID-19 across Ministries, whilst ensuring that the general public continues to be served irrespective if the service is being offered from the office or remotely.
- 3.3.5** Consequently, MITA's Service Call Centre was being inundated with various type of requests, including the creation of user accounts and VPN accounts, so that users from within the respective Ministry could work from home, and access information systems and working documents remotely. In this regard, the NAO was provided with a statistical report of all the requests received from the five Ministries, which were selected for the purpose of this audit exercise. Amongst the various types of requests, the NAO noted that MITA's Service Call Centre received a total of 17,203 requests from the Ministry for Health (MFH), over a period of one

year, which were related to the management of user accounts¹⁴ (Figure 2 refers). Over this period, MITA's Service Call Centre also assisted users who requested for assistance on their VPN account when teleworking.

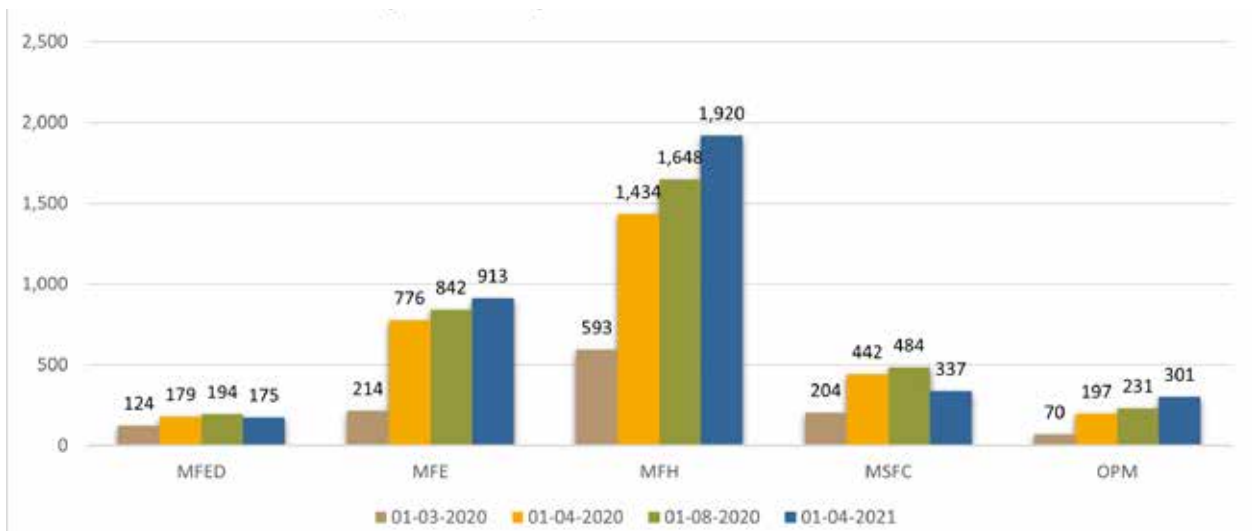
Figure 2: Number of requests by MITA's Service Call Centre between 01/03/2020 and 31/03/2021



Source: MITA

3.3.6 To this effect, the number of active VPN users across the five Ministries increased gradually (Figure 3 and 4 refers) between 1st March 2020 and 1st April 2021, with a sharp increase on 1st April 2020, when most of the public servants were working remotely from home.

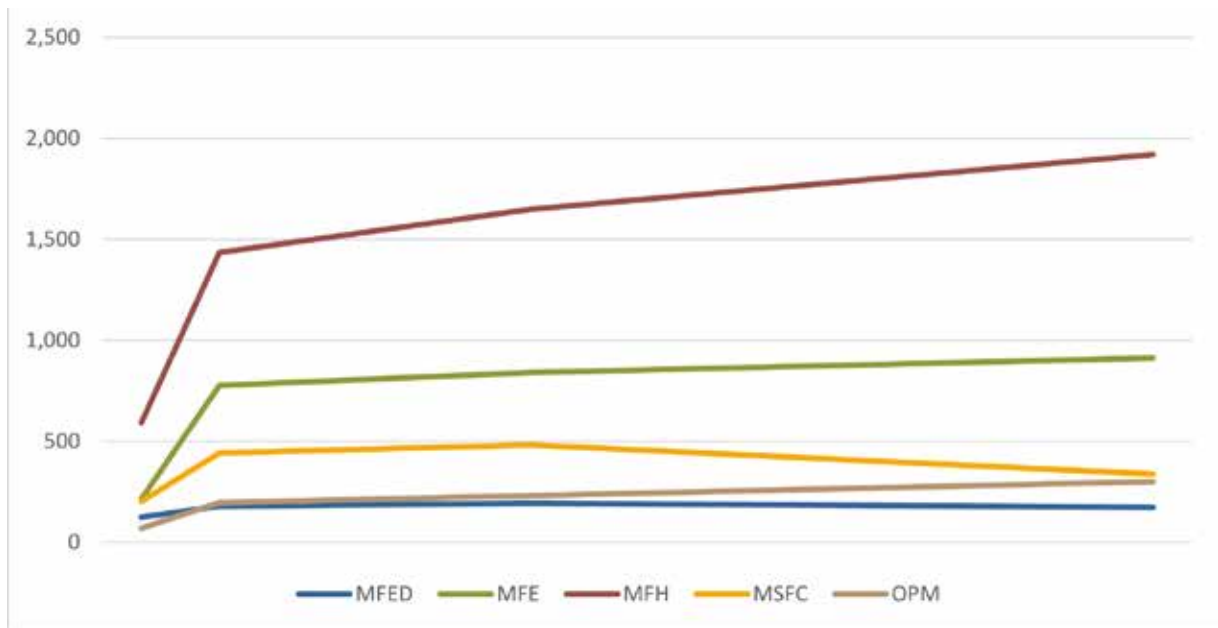
Figure 3: Number of active VPN users per Ministry between 01/03/2020 and 01/04/2021



Source: MITA

¹⁴ Requests to grant VPN access are captured under the Account Management classification, which also includes requests for the creation of user accounts, granting of access rights, password changes, modifications to existing user accounts, etc.

Figure 4: Trend of active VPN users between 01/03/2020 and 01/04/2021



Source: MITA

- 3.3.7** It is to be noted that requests for teleworking arrangements within the public service is only considered on a case-by-case basis taking into consideration the Ministry's/Department's status of the implementation of remote working and the employee's needs. To date, such teleworking arrangements can only be made for a short-term period but not beyond 3rd April 2023¹⁵ after which the remote working policy comes into play.
- 3.3.8** The remote working policy was published for the public service in July 2021. This will entail in an 18-month transition period from October 2021, to facilitate the transition from the existing teleworking system towards a new remote working policy. This policy provides guidelines on how to ensure professional standards are maintained in service provision, data protection, employee wellbeing and the use of technological equipment, as well as to safeguard laws, policies and sectoral agreements that are currently in force. To facilitate this transition of remote working, the Institute for the Public Service (IPS) was responsible to provide specific training on both the management and technological aspects of this policy.
- 3.3.9** The concept of remote working brought about a radical change in how the system worked, with entire departments being able to leave their offices and work elsewhere. This initiative gave the possibility for quite a number of workers from within the public administration to work online and from home.

¹⁵ Microsoft Word - Manual on WLB_Remote Working 04 Oct 2021 - Full Version (gov.mt)

3.4 MITA has invested heavily in the modernisation of its infrastructure and information systems throughout the years

3.4.1 MITA has invested heavily to modernise its infrastructure, including the Data Centre, Government Network and the Hybrid Cloud platform, which are all critical for Government operations. MITA's Data Centre keeps up with leading technology trends, in terms of computing, network, storage and backup infrastructure. The implementation of the Hybrid Cloud platform offered increased options for clients who could opt to make use of both on-premise MITA-managed cloud resources as well as public cloud services.

3.4.2 In this regard, the NAO was informed that during the past five years, MITA spent around €14.6 million on infrastructural enhancements, which MITA deemed *"as having enabled or aided the continued provision of seamless IT services to Government during the pandemic"*. Given the above investment, MITA could continue with the implementation of advanced technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) and data analytics.

3.4.3 The proliferation and the growing dependence on IT in the public administration was accompanied by an increase in threats from malicious attackers, both in frequency and sophistication. Throughout these past five years, MITA also invested in its security infrastructure (forming part of the above-mentioned €14.6 million investment), to ensure that security is predominant in all areas and maintained throughout a complete solution's life-cycle.

3.4.4 In this context, MITA monitors its network proactively, collating and analysing information to detect suspicious or unauthorised behaviour and taking immediate measures to protect against potential security breaches. This work is enhanced by security tools that adopt AI, leveraging machine learning and predictive analytics to anticipate threats before they arise. It also ensures that security and privacy by design are engrained in the architecture and development of Government information systems.

3.4.5 The Agency also collaborates with external cyber security organisations to share intelligence about actual and potential threats. As a result, MITA has been pivotal in establishing coordination with foreign counterparts to develop the necessary skills to assist in resolving cyberattacks. MITA contributed and will continue to contribute towards cyber security, for the protection of the country's information systems, so as not to end up as a victim of malicious attacks.

3.4.6 During the COVID-19 pandemic, MITA was instrumental in safeguarding the entire ICT infrastructure of the Government. In particular, MITA gave essential IT support to the healthcare sector throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This consisted in the provision of IT infrastructure and related services, software application development and implementation and consultancy services to MFH and its third-party IT suppliers. In more detail, MITA provided and set up the necessary infrastructure to host Go.Data.¹⁶ At the same time, MITA set up the IT infrastructure

¹⁶ Go.Data is the World Health Organisation (WHO) web portal that was used to manage COVID case information in the first phases of the pandemic.

for swab centres across the Maltese islands, and to operate telemedicine services, which expanded greatly during the pandemic. MITA developed and implemented a new software service on the myHealth platform intended to relieve pressure from contact tracing and which enabled the automated delivery of COVID Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test results, in the form of text messages (SMS), to the general public. In addition, MITA scaled up the myHealth infrastructure to cope with the plus 350 per cent increase in usage that resulted from the general public accessing the myHealth Portal to retrieve their COVID PCR test results.

- 3.4.7 MITA and Microsoft supported the COVID Response Team in the development of a Test Registration and Tracking system, based on the Microsoft Dynamics 365 product. This included application design, prototyping and testing, as well as the provisioning and implementation of the required Cloud services. In 2022, the application was further developed and enhanced into a fully integrated Test, Track and Trace System.
- 3.4.8 During 2020, MITA played a central role in the development and implementation of the national contact tracing mobile application, COVID Alert Malta, which operated between September 2020 and July 2022. MITA's expertise in the use of, development and maintenance of open-source software was instrumental in the development of the mobile application, which was based on the international Decentralized Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing (DP3T) open protocol, and which was available for both Android and iOS smart phones. In 2021, MITA connected COVID Alert Malta with the European Federated Gateway Service (EFGS), thus enabling the application to continue working even whilst the user was in another participating European country.
- 3.4.9 In 2021, MITA developed and launched the COVID Result Submission Portal (CRSP), through which all COVID test providers report rapid antigen test results to the Superintendent for Public Health, while private test providers report PCR test results. Other developments by MITA in 2021 included a public portal, <https://vaccin.gov.mt>, through which entitled citizens were able to register their interest to take the COVID vaccine, a facility in myHealth portal through which private doctors could record COVID vaccinations given privately, and a data interface between the CRSP and the Test, Track and Trace System that enabled the transmission of COVID test results to the Test, Track and Trace System in real-time. When developing these software applications, MITA employed agile software development methods, such as end-user prototyping workshops, incremental delivery and continuous improvement of the software applications. This was essential to meet the tight software delivery schedules brought about by the pandemic.
- 3.4.10 Throughout the pandemic, MITA was also key in enabling Mater Dei hospital to work remotely. Since the number of healthcare professionals in quarantine was increasing drastically, it was crucial for business continuity to provide the facility for these healthcare professionals to continue working from home. Apart from providing an extraordinary level of support on the critical Integrated Health Information systems, MITA also provided continuous support in the

creation of personal and generic email accounts and for the provision of enhanced storage facilities based on Microsoft Teams, SharePoint and OneDrive environments, as well as technical consultancy to the Ministry's IT supplier responsible for the software development and implementation of the Maltese Digital COVID Certificate (DCC).

Key
Facts

3.4.11 The Agency was also critical in providing all the IT tools to more than 30,000 public administration employees. These IT tools enabled the Government to provide its employees flexible working conditions to meet their immediate needs, whilst ensuring that the general public continued to be served during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive
Summary

3.4.12 The NAO was informed that MITA didn't make any additional unplanned investments to ensure that it provides business continuity across Government during the COVID-19 pandemic. As stated earlier above, the infrastructure was already robust and in place, and the investments in the network/server infrastructure, data centres, VPN connectivity, roll-out of Microsoft Office 365, etc. was spread throughout the years. The only costs incurred during this pandemic were related to the increase in the internet bandwidth, to accommodate the expected higher demand on incoming connections as a result of teleworking, which was permissible in the service level agreement that MITA had with the local internet service provider.

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

3.4.13 The NAO also noted that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all MITA employees already owned a laptop and had VPN connectivity, whilst there was a big push within Government Ministries to procure laptops instead of PCs, to ease the mobility between the home and office. In fact, a few years back, MITA had kicked off the process of allocating laptops to all its employees, with the aim of implementing the concept of hot desking, whereby employees could work across the various MITA offices. In addition, MITA had enhanced its communication tools by implementing unlimited mobile services from both a voice and data perspective, and introduced videoconferencing tools such as Microsoft Teams, through the roll out Microsoft Office 365 across all Government.

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

3.4.14 All of the above investments enabled MITA to provide a robust and secure ICT infrastructure as well as seamless IT services to Government and the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 5

3.5 Conclusion

3.5.1 MITA allocated the necessary time and effort to plan and think of possible scenarios and be prepared to refine its business response in the event of a possible COVID-19 outbreak in Malta. In the eventuality of a total lockdown, MITA had made all the necessary plans to continue operating and supporting critical infrastructure services and client operations. This ensured that the Government core operations services, such as the availability of MAGNET, email and Internet services, client service call support, infrastructure and systems operations, and the monitoring of critical infrastructure against cyber security threats, remain operational.

Chapter 6

Appendix

- 3.5.2 MITA has invested heavily to modernise its infrastructure, including the Data Centre, Government Network and the Hybrid Cloud platform, which are all critical for Government operations. In this context, the NAO was informed that during the past five years, MITA spent around €14.6 million on infrastructural enhancements, which MITA deemed “*as having enabled or aided the continued provision of seamless IT services to Government during the pandemic*”.
- 3.5.3 During the COVID-19 pandemic, MITA was instrumental in safeguarding the entire ICT infrastructure of the Government. In particular, MITA helped the healthcare sector set up the IT infrastructure for swab centres across the Maltese islands, operate telemedicine and contract tracing systems amongst others. The Agency was also critical in providing all the IT tools to more than 30,000 public administration employees. These IT tools enabled the Government to provide its employees flexible working conditions to meet their immediate needs, whilst ensuring that the general public continued to be served during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.5.4 MITA did not make any additional unplanned investments to ensure that it provides business continuity across Government during the COVID-19 pandemic as the infrastructure was already robust and in place. The investments in the network/server infrastructure, data centres, VPN connectivity, roll-out of Microsoft Office 365, and so on were spread throughout the years.

Chapter 4 | Business continuity within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights

Key Facts

Executive Summary

Chapter 1

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Appendix

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 The business continuity measures, adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights (MSPC), generally resulted in their pre-determined outputs and outcomes. To a large extent, the provision of services remained at the same quality levels of pre-COVID-19. Moreover, additional benefits were introduced to assist individuals during this period.

4.1.2 This review noted that the MSPC is currently developing a contingency plan with respect to the main services provided by this Ministry. Nevertheless, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the MSPC already had a sound home working infrastructure in place. A number of employees within this Ministry were already granted the possibility of making use of this working arrangement. This was mainly applicable to working parents within the Ministry. To this end, the applicable infrastructure, which enables remote working, mainly Information Technology (IT) infrastructure such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), was almost already in place and only minor adjustments were required. Moreover, a number of MSPC employees already had a remote working contract in place, which also catered for financial assistance in the upgrading of their personal home internet. Therefore, the Ministry did not incur any additional significant financial costs to shift its operations from office to remote working during the early stages of the pandemic, thus facilitating its business continuity.

4.1.3 During this period, most services related to social benefits provided through the area offices managed by MSPC shifted to the servizz.gov agency. The latter provides customer interface through three main channels namely: telephone enquiries on the Freephone 153, the provision of online services, and the face-to-face assistance in the 24 hubs located around Malta. In the early stages of this shift, and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most services were provided through either telephone enquiries or the online portal. However, as measures related to the pandemic started to be released, face-to-face assistance also started to be provided through the servizz.gov hubs, which were gradually launched due to the increase workload, and to extend this agency reachability across Malta. At this juncture, it is to be noted that MSPC remains the main entity responsible for the processing of all applications received.

Audit approach

4.1.4 In 2020, MSPC had in place a total of 54 social security benefits. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the benefits managed by MSPC. This Ministry is responsible for the disbursement of contributory and non-contributory benefits. The former relates to benefits that are to replace

earnings such as unemployment, illness and retirement. The benefit is awarded if you have paid or been credited enough national insurance (NI) contributions. On the other hand, non-contributory benefits are not based on NI contributions and include child allowance, old age pension, disability pension/allowance, total social assistance, medical assistance, supplementary allowance, in-work benefit, child supplementary benefit and bonus.

Table 1: Social security benefits (2020)

Type of benefit	Total number of benefits	No. of Beneficiaries	Amount € '000)
Contributory benefits	29	134,710	897,019
Out of which temporary assistance benefits	4	8,850	14,522
Non-contributory benefits	25	117,543	198,641
Out of which temporary assistance benefits	0	0	0
Total	54	252,253	1,095,660

Source: MSPC

4.1.5 Within this context, this performance audit sought to evaluate the degree to which MSPC maintained the pre-pandemic level of service during the period 2020 and 2021. For the scope of this audit, this Office selected a sample of eight benefits, from the total population of 54 benefits illustrated in Table 1. Due to their importance and their sensitivity, all the four temporary benefits issued during the pandemic as assistance to service-users, were included in the audit sample. The four temporary benefits issued on 25th March 2020 comprised the additional unemployment benefit, the disability benefit, the medical benefit, and the parent benefit.

4.1.6 The remaining four sampled benefits comprised two contributory and two non-contributory benefits. For the scope of this audit, the two benefits with the highest 2020 financial materiality within each category, were selected. To this end, within the contributory benefits section, the two-thirds pension, and the survivor’s pension were selected, whereas within the non-contributory benefits section, the children’s allowance and the age pension were selected.

4.1.7 During 2020, the eight sampled allowances represented 49 per cent of the total beneficiaries. Moreover, during the same period, the sampled benefits constituted 60 per cent of the total social security spending.

Chapter structure

4.1.8 Against this background, this Chapter seeks to determine whether:

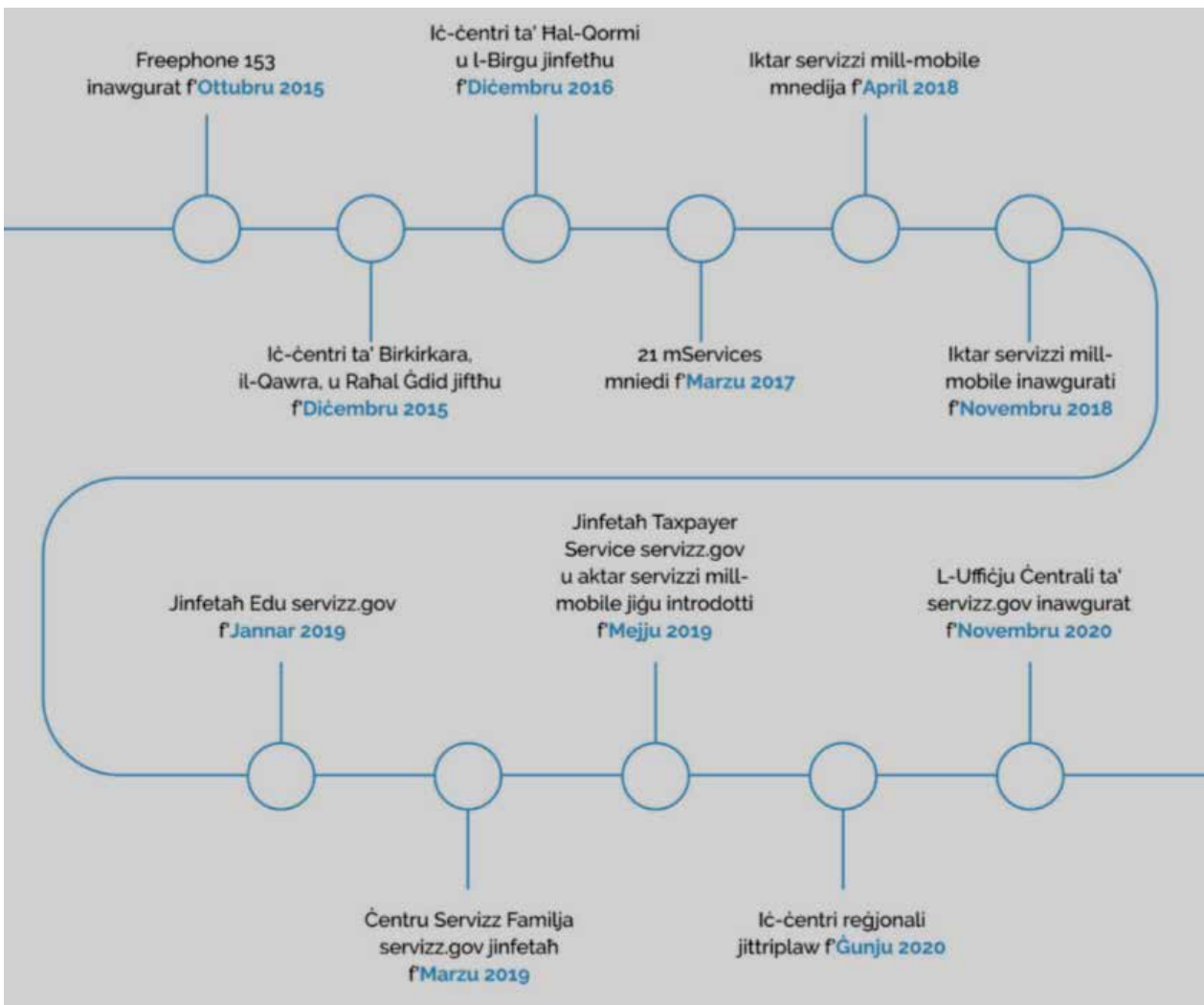
- i. The accelerated extension of the servizz.gov functions facilitated MSPC’s customer interface to enable business continuity during pandemic restrictions.

- ii. MSPC launched, processed and disbursed new COVID-19 related benefits in a reasonable period.
- iii. The processing and disbursement of already existing social benefits was at the same level of service as that of the pre-COVID-19.
- iv. The opportunity exists to strengthen the monitoring function relating to the disbursement of social benefits.

4.2 The pandemic accelerated the adoption of the new MSPC customer interface through servizz.gov

4.2.1 The 'National Digital Strategy 2014 – 2020' projected that citizens and businesses would benefit from a one-stop shop concept, whereby they will be able to access Government services from their home, offices or hubs. To address this objective, in 2015 Government established servizz.gov whereby the public could access Government services on a 24/7 basis.

Figure 5: The development of servizz.gov (2015-2020)



Source: Għas-servizz Tiegħek – Annual Publication 2020

4.2.2 The strategy envisaged that over time, MSPC district offices services will be offered through servizz.gov. The transfer of services started during 2020, which coincided with the early stages of the pandemic. Figure 5 shows the development of the servizz.gov project since its inception in 2015.

4.2.3 Servizz.gov provided an opportunity for citizens to be able to access MSPC services especially when measures were introduced to restrict the spread of the COVID-19 virus, where, one-to-one interactions were restricted. From MSPC’s perspective, this scenario enabled it to continue with its operations, hence facilitating business accessibility and continuity during the pandemic, as will be discussed within the next sections of this Chapter.

4.3 MSPC launched, processed and disbursed new COVID-19 related benefits in a reasonable period

4.3.1 During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, to alleviate socio-economic problems, the MSPC introduced four new temporary social benefits. An overview of the four new temporary benefits, together with their respective number of beneficiaries and spending for each benefit is illustrated below. Table 2 refers.

Table 2: Four temporary benefits issued during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jan-Dec 2020)

Description of Benefit	Beneficiaries	Amount (€ '000)	Frequency of Payment
COVID-19 Benefits			
(Additional) Disability Benefit	380	523	Weekly
(Additional) Parent Benefit	4,601	9,361	Weekly
(Additional) Medical Benefit	1,706	2,505	Weekly
Additional Unemployment Benefit	2,163	2,133	Weekly
Total	8,850	14,522	

Source: MSPC

4.3.2 Table 2 outlines that from the beginning of the pandemic up to December 2020, 8,850 individuals benefitted from these four benefits. During this period, the total spending with respect to these benefits amounted to over €14.5 million.

MSPC’s was able to extend its business operations by introducing four new COVID-19 related benefits

4.3.3 The award and disbursement of these benefits necessitated the close collaboration of various national entities. Citizens could apply for these benefits from the various channels provided by MSPC and servizz.gov. MSPC, in collaboration with MITA, provided the necessary IT infrastructure for citizens to access these services online through the Ministry’s website, whilst MFE made a supplementary allocation to finance the COVID-19 temporary benefits.

4.3.4 To award these COVID-19 temporary benefits, MSPC had to adjust its operations. Table 3 provides a snapshot of the key factors which influenced MSPC recurrent expenditure.

Table 3: Additional costs incurred to provide COVID-19 temporary benefits by MSPC (2020)

Variable	Additional costs (€)
Subcontracting	24,780
Overtime	4,583
Total	29,363

Source: MSPC

4.3.5 Table 3 shows that MSPC incurred only a marginal cost to award COVID-19 temporary benefits. The ensuing paragraphs discuss the key variables contributing to these costs. The following refers:

- i. **Subcontracting:** the workload of MSPC was affected by the introduction of COVID-19 temporary benefits. MSPC had to resort to subcontracting to award benefits associated with three out of the four COVID-19 temporary allowances. The three benefits related to the parent, medical and disability allowance. Such a decision was taken due to the forecasted increase in workload and the number of applications received during the first days of the roll-out for these benefits. As payments had to be issued immediately, the Ministry had to resort to a direct order method rather than procurement through tendering procedure. The amount disbursed in this case amounted to €24,780 covering 1,400 hours of service. This review notes that MSPC could opt for this procurement process in view of the exceptional national circumstances, whereby the legislation in place allows for direct order subject to the prior written approval of the Minister or his delegate.¹⁷
- ii. **Overtime:** to address the increase in workload while ascertaining that the day-to-day operations continue without interruptions, MSPC identified a cohort of staff to perform duties with respect to the four COVID-19 temporary benefits. Nevertheless, this situation necessitated that MSPC approves overtime to ensure business continuity. However, the expenditure in this regard, can be considered as minimal, as it amounts to only €6,976 for a total of 444 hours in overtime.

Generally, MSPC processed the four COVID-19 related benefits in a timely manner

4.3.6 MSPC was responsible for the receipt of applications, processing and subsequent disbursement relating to the COVID-19 benefits. These benefits were generally of an additional nature to existing benefits to mitigate the socio-economic effects of the pandemic.

4.3.7 This Office aimed to determine the degree to which, MSPC was able to adapt its operations to absorb the issuing of these supplementary benefits in a timely manner. In the absence of documented policies, this Office benchmarked the processing times of the four new benefits

¹⁷ Procurement Regulations, Article 103.

against MSPC’s undocumented practices, which stipulate that processing time for benefits is to range between one to two weeks. Table 4 refers.

Table 4: Average processing time of COVID-19 benefits (Days)

COVID-19 Benefit	MSPC’s Informal Processing benchmark (Days)	Actual processing time (Days)
(Additional) Disability benefit	14	1.16
(Additional) Parent benefit	10	1.56
(Additional) Medical benefit	10	1.33
Additional Unemployment benefit	7	7.71

Source: Based on MSPC data

4.3.8 Table 4 shows that MSPC processed the COVID-19 benefits applications in an expedient manner. This situation materialised as MSPC review process was limited to verifying that the applicant was already receiving non-COVID-19 benefits and did not necessitate that applicants submit any additional information when applying to such benefits.

4.3.9 The only benefit that slightly exceeded the internal stipulated set benchmark was the additional unemployment benefit. Nevertheless, the difference between the Ministry’s undocumented criteria and actual processing time cannot be considered as material.

4.4 MSPC performance related to existing benefits remained at the same level as the pre-pandemic period

4.4.1 During the period under review, the Ministry neither had a contingency plan in place nor a quality service charter. Nonetheless, MSPC generally continued with their operations seamlessly partly due to the Ministry’s already established protocols to facilitate remote working, and the reengineering of its business operations to enable the transfer of the customer interface to the servizz.gov agency. In such circumstances, staff flexibility proved extremely useful.

4.4.2 The MSPC protocols referred to in the preceding paragraph did not make reference to any Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), however, as discussed in paragraph 4.3.7, MSPC had the undocumented internal practice, which referred to the expected processing times of social security benefits. To this end, the NAO was constrained to assess the effectiveness of MSPC operations by gauging the degree to which current benefits were issued in a timely manner, that is, as per scheduled payment dates and against these undocumented practices concerning processing times of new applications.

4.4.3 For the purpose of this analysis, this Office sampled four benefits, which comprised two contributory and two non-contributory benefits. The sampling criteria related to the two most financially material expenditure incurred by Government with respect to social benefits within each category.

4.4.4 Table 5 illustrates the total number of beneficiaries and amount disbursed during 2020.

Table 5: The non-COVID-19 sampled benefits (Jan-Dec 2020)

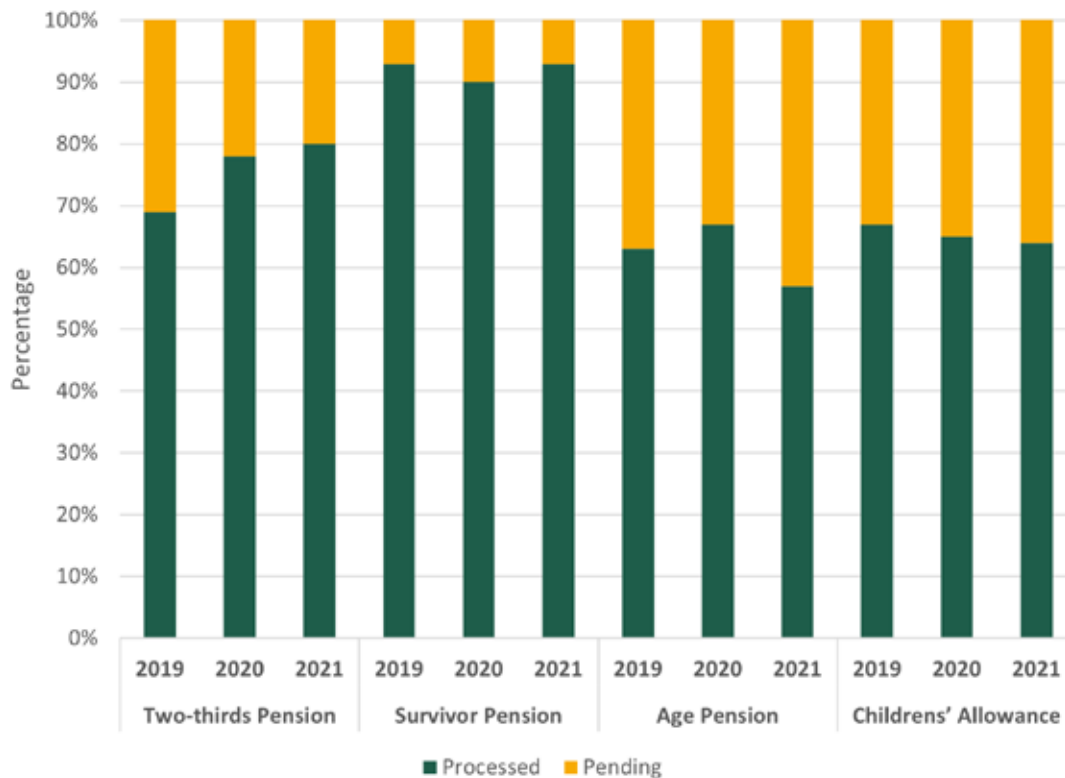
Description of Benefit	Beneficiaries	Amount (€ '000)	Frequency of Payment
Contributory Benefits			
Two-Thirds Pension	53,499	490,741	4 weeks
Survivors' Pension	9,795	85,892	4 weeks
Non-Contributory Benefits			
Children's Allowance	45,607	39,346	Quarterly
Age Pension	4,907	24,898	4 weeks

Source: MSPC

Generally, MSPC processed similar volumes of new applications relating to exiting benefits as in the pre-pandemic period

4.4.5 To determine the level of productivity during the 2019 to 2021 timeframe, the NAO compared the number of applications that MSPC received and processed during this period. In the absence of formal KPIs, 2019 was used to benchmark MSPC's productivity prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Productivity was calculated by analysing the number of processed applications that is both accepted and rejected against the number of received applications and other applications brought forward from the previous years. Figure 6 refers.

Figure 6: MSPC productivity levels with respect to the non-COVID-19 sampled benefits



Source: Based on MSPC data

4.4.6 Figure 6 shows that MSPC maintained the same level of productivity with respect to the processing of non-COVID-19 sampled benefits. Within this context, processing times refers to the period between the receipt of an application until MSPC approves it for payment. To this end, there were only marginal differences in the percentage of pending applications between the three years portrayed by the above chart. The vast majority of outstanding applications noted at years’ end related to benefits requests received at MSPC at the latter part of the year. A case in point relate to the Age Pension where 87 per cent of the outstanding applications were received in the fourth quarter of 2021.

4.4.7 The foregoing implies that notwithstanding the operational limitations encountered during the pandemic, MSPC managed to continue with its business activities. Nonetheless, measuring MSPC’s performance solely in terms of volume does not in itself provide conclusive indicators. Consequently, this aspect of performance assessment needs to be evaluated in tandem with processing times, as discussed in the next section.

Significant difference in processing times did not materialise when benchmarking MSPC performance with the pre-pandemic levels

4.4.8 Another exercise carried out by this Office to assess the degree to which MSPC continued with its business operations entailed measuring the average number of days to process an application relating to an existing benefit received during the period 2019 to 2021. The scope of this exercise included 2019, to enable the NAO to make comparative analysis with operations undertaken by MSPC in the pre-pandemic era. Table 6 refers.

Table 6: Average number of days taken by MSPC to process received applications

Year of receipt of application	Two-thirds’ pension (days)	Survivor Pension (days)	Age Pension (days)	Children’s Allowance (days)
MSPC’s undocumented benchmark ¹⁸	90	60	Not specified ¹⁹	90
2019	132	35	43	73
2020	92	28	20	53
2021	72	28	23	33

Source: Based on MSPC data

4.4.9 Table 6 shows the following:

- i. When comparing the above data to MSPC’s undocumented benchmark, Table 6 shows that with the exception of the two-thirds pension in 2019, all benefits were issued within the set timeframe.

¹⁸ Refer to Paragraph 4.4.2.

¹⁹ MSFC contend that since the verification, approval and award of Age Pension requires complex processing, which also involves other entities such as banks and tax revenue departments, the Ministry’s main interest is that disbursement is affected correctly and on the due date.

- ii. During the period under review, MSPC registered improvement in terms of processing time across all the four non-COVID-19 sampled benefits.

The disbursement relating to the sampled benefits was affected on the scheduled date

4.4.10 The third criteria adopted by the NAO to assess MSPC’s operational performance regarding the benefits, as outlined in Table 6, entailed verifying that benefit payment was affected on its due date. To this end, this performance audit sought that the MSPC consistently effected payments in accordance with the pre-determined schedule. Appendix I refers.

4.5 Opportunities exist for MSPC to strengthen its monitoring function

4.5.1 Monitoring is a critical management function especially in periods such as those recently experienced by Governmental organisations such as the MSPC. This Ministry’s monitoring generally reflected the practices in place in the pre-pandemic era. MSPC’s organisational structure in itself is conducive to a top-down oversight and bottom-up reporting. Generally, these elements of monitoring were formally and informally in place.

4.5.2 An effective monitoring function also necessitates timely and comprehensive information related to the organisations business operations. In MSPC case, such inputs include feedback from clients and ad hoc studies, to assess how the Ministry was performing in constantly changing circumstances due to the pandemic.

MSPC did not maintain data regarding customer queries

4.5.3 This Office sought to determine the degree to which MSPC operations were considered satisfactory by their users. This approach consequently sought to evaluate an important input towards MSPC’s monitoring function. This data is important as it related to the transition period from MSPC to servizz.gov – a particular period which required effective monitoring to ensure that initial teething troubles were addressed. However, MSPC did not maintain records regarding the total number of walk-ins at the district offices, the number of telephone calls or emails received prior to the changeover to servizz.gov. This situation severs the customer care audit trail and diminishes the overall effectiveness of MSPC’s monitoring function.

4.5.4 Another source of information to facilitate MSPC monitoring function relates to data emanating from servizz.gov. MSPC’s monitoring function was further weakened as the data provided by servizz.gov had the following limitations:

- i. During 2019, servizz.gov managed five regional hubs. However, of these only the Qormi and Birgu hubs provided customer services to MSPC services. Thus, MSPC monitoring function could only elicit information relating to customer information collated by these hubs, which had been in operation since November and July respectively.

- ii. All queries received on Freephone 153 which are then sent to the Department (DSS) for follow-up, contain the necessary information, such as contact details and case description. The latter, however, is not always consistently categorised. When a query is handled at source (First Contact Resolution), the query may be recorded as anonymous. These limitations further limit MSPC’s monitoring capabilities. In this regard, servizz.gov is looking to better categorise and ensure appropriate recording of queries in the CRM application.

4.5.5 The circumstances outlined in paragraphs 4.5.3 and 4.5.4 highlights that MSPC’s monitoring function was hindered on two counts. Firstly, the Ministry did not collate customer information from its area offices and secondly, there are some limitations in information collated by servizz.gov. At this juncture, it is to be noted that servizz.gov is investing in data collection and visualisation. Although the new CRM will cater for such limitations, this Agency is seeking ways to address the situation in the interim to ensure that data is collected and used effectively. The aforementioned situation also impacted this performance audit since meaningful comparative analysis on the effectiveness of customer interface and related services could not be undertaken as planned.

MSPC did not commission any studies to gauge employee and customer experience during the COVID-19 pandemic

4.5.6 The opportunity existed for MSPC’s monitoring function to be supported through ad hoc studies to gauge its performance during the exceptional circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Such studies could solicit information about MSPC staff experience and on the effectiveness of its customer interface through servizz.gov. Nevertheless, MSPC did not carry out any studies, including surveys, to determine the employee and customer experience, including satisfaction levels. This can be seen as a missed opportunity for MSPC to avail itself of other important inputs and sources in its quest to draft and update the contingency plans and quality service charters.

4.6 Conclusion

4.6.1 This Chapter sought to determine the degree to which MSPC continued with its day-to-day business during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry did not have a contingency plan in place to cater for the emerging circumstances. Nonetheless, MSPC adapted rapidly to the external changing circumstances brought about by the health restrictions imposed. The Ministry’s expedient response in part was due to mechanisms, which MSPC has already established, namely those relating to remote working. At the same time, and with minimal costs, MSPC managed to introduce the temporary COVID-19 benefits by slightly amending its operations to provide these services in a reasonable time. Meanwhile, the Ministry also continued with its plan to shift its customer interface from the social security hubs to the servizz.gov. Analysis carried out by this Office, showed that service provision by MSPC remained to the pre-pandemic levels.

4.6.2 This Office noted that MSPC did not encounter any significant problems relating to its operations and service provision during the pandemic. However, the opportunity exists for MSPC to strengthen its monitoring function by ensuring that it has comprehensive and reliable data relating to its customer interface. This will necessitate coordination with servizz.gov, who have now assumed the customer interface services. Moreover, the monitoring function would be further strengthened by the commissioning of ad hoc studies, to gauge employee and customer experience, which in turn would serve as an input to the compilation of a contingency plan and quality service charter.

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Facts

Executive
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Chapter 3

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Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Appendix

Chapter 5 | Business continuity within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation

5.1 Background

- 5.1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people from all walks of life irrespective of nationality, level of education, income or gender, but unfortunately it hit the most vulnerable hardest. The mitigation measures in response to COVID-19 have interrupted conventional schooling when the educational institutions faced an unprecedented situation with the sudden closure of all the schools.
- 5.1.2 Unable to meet in classrooms, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) together with the schools' administration had to adapt to these new circumstances and come up with a solution to offer online schooling. This sudden shift to teaching and learning at home brought with it a number of challenges and opportunities. Teachers had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of online teaching, for which they may not have been trained. On the other hand, learners, especially those from marginalised groups who may not have access to digital resources or struggled to learn on their own, were at risk of falling behind during periods when schools were closed as a mitigation measure to the pandemic.
- 5.1.3 Between March and June 2020, when the schools were closed, the MEYR started working on how to re-open the schools for the 2020-2021 scholastic year and ensure that all the educators, schools' administration, students and all other staff could return physically to school in a healthy and safe environment.
- 5.1.4 In this context, the Directorates for Education, together with the schools' administration, took into consideration the *'Advice and guidelines to the educational sector for the re-opening of primary and secondary schools in Malta'* publication that was issued by MFH. In accordance with this advice and guidelines, the Ministry implemented a number of measures relating to the curriculum and services for the re-opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. These guidelines were meant to mitigate, as much as possible, against the transmission of COVID-19 virus.
- 5.1.5 In line with the above guidelines, which were being updated from time to time by the Public Health authorities, the MEYR drafted a working Document on *'School Curriculum and Services Implementation Plan – 2020/21'*, which included a number of recommendations for school leadership teams, comprising of school top management, namely the Head College Network and respective Head and Assistant Heads of school, to consider and adopt within their respective schools. One fundamental approach that was recommended by the Public Health authorities was the creation of distinct groups of students (referred to as bubbles),

which mitigated the interaction with other so called “bubbles”. This was achievable through amendments to the curriculum planning and timetabling in such a way to ensure the continued provision of education to all the students notwithstanding these extraordinary circumstances.

5.1.6 Against this background, this Chapter will look into how MEYR adopted the Government’s policies and guidelines to ensure business continuity across all the schools while limiting the spread of COVID-19. This will be presented in four different sections, namely to:

- i. Explain how MEYR planned and implemented measures to ensure that educators and students are physically present in schools and the extent to which all the necessary health and safety precautions were taken into account.
- ii. Assess the degree to which the COVID-19 pandemic affected learners and educators to physically return to schools in terms of attendance and absenteeism.
- iii. Review the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on existing ICT infrastructure and the methods of teaching and learning across State schools.
- iv. Highlight the challenges the Ministry and the schools’ administration faced when all the learners and educators returned physically to school during the 2020-2021 scholastic year.

5.1.7 In line with the above, the NAO also analysed the schools’ administration and educator’s perspectives on the overall challenges the State schools had to face during the COVID-19 pandemic through an online survey. The latter was drawn up by the NAO and disseminated to all Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools across Malta and Gozo through the Department for Educational Services. The questions asked throughout this online survey and the overall feedback received from the schools’ administration and educators are depicted in Appendix II and III of this Report accordingly.²⁰

5.2 The primary aim of the Education authorities was that schools re-open and all students return to school in a healthy and safe environment

5.2.1 Given the evolving circumstances where the spread of the virus across Europe was increasing, and the first reported cases of COVID-19 in Malta, it became evident that the pandemic will have a longer-term effect on schools than anticipated. The Ministry, aside from focusing on the developments at the time, also started working on possible future scenarios. When all the schools in Malta had to close in March 2020, schools had to resort to online teaching for students to complete their syllabus. Added to this, the end-of year examinations were cancelled and students who were to sit for their ordinary, intermediate and advanced level examination sessions were given an evaluation according to their work at school.

²⁰ The survey elicited feedback from 1,451 respondents from a population of 6,762. This implies that survey results are to be interpreted at a confidence level of 2.3, when considering a confidence interval of 95 per cent.

- 5.2.2 Whilst the Government was monitoring the COVID-19 situation, the Ministry was already planning and holding meetings with all the relevant stakeholders, including the Superintendence of Public Health, teachers' unions, schools' administration and parents associations, on the possible re-opening of schools in September 2020. For instance, the Ministry worked together with the Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students (MAPSSS), who in turn drafted a document listing a number of recommendations and useful information for parents or guardians. This document, entitled '*Il-Ftuħ mill-Ġdid tal-Iskejjel fi Żmien il-COVID-19*' served as an informational campaign that encouraged parents or guardians to follow simple best practices to reduce the spread of the virus, and ensure that children and educators operate in a healthy and safe environment when they physically return to school.
- 5.2.3 In light of this, the Directorates for Education, together with the schools' administration, implemented a number of measures related to the school logistics and operations for the re-opening of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, a '*Schools Logistics and Operations Implementation Plan*' was drafted to reflect the measures based on scientific evidence as published in the '*Advice and guidelines to the educational sector for the re-opening of primary and secondary schools in Malta*' highlighted earlier above. The plan served as guidelines for the school administration for the re-opening of schools, whereby it was recommended that "*every school engages and encourages everyone present in the school and community to practice preventive behaviours*". These guidelines were being continuously updated to reflect the realities and needs of the schools during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 5.2.4 The NAO was informed that before the schools re-opened for the 2020-2021 scholastic year, the Ministry also carried out ad-hoc risk assessments in all State schools to assess the school setup and verify whether each school had adopted and implemented the measures that were highlighted in the '*Advice and guidelines to the educational sector for the re-opening of primary and secondary schools in Malta*' report. The end result was documented in a risk assessment report, which was handed to every Head of school, who in turn had to make sure that any findings were taken into account and the necessary course of action was taken.
- 5.2.5 To ensure that all the educators and learners adhere to the guidelines issued by the Health authorities, the Ministry, in collaboration with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), also undertook a continuous educational campaign in providing practical ideas to help children and educators return to school safely and translate the above guidelines into practical measures that could be implemented in schools to avoid the inadvertent spread of the virus. In this context, a number of posters were distributed and affixed in strategic locations across the schools' premises, reminding everyone present to:
- i. maintain social distance;
 - ii. wear a facemask at all times;
 - iii. maintain a high level of hygiene and adhere to step-by-step instructions on how hands should be cleaned;

- iv. make use of outdoor areas and designated areas, for students in the same group or bubble, to stay together during school breaks, etc.

5.2.6 In addition, the Ministry also issued a few videos to explain how to adhere to Health authorities' guidelines and learn in a healthy and safe environment.

5.2.7 The overall impact of these guidelines issued by the Health authorities was also reflected in the online survey. In fact, 81 per cent of the respondents felt that their respective school scored "very good" or "excellent" (4 or 5 star rating) in adopting to the public Health measures. Similarly, 82 per cent of the respondents gave a rating of 4 or 5 star when asked to rate how the administrative staff, educators and students adapted to the new situation and adhered to the protocols issued by the competent authorities (Appendix III refers)

5.2.8 The foregoing illustrates that business continuity within the Ministry's mandate was facilitated through:

- i. strategic planning and policy development;

- ii. constant collaboration with MFH and the Superintendence of Public Health;

- iii. varying levels of communication with stakeholders;

- iv. implemented measures to enable online teaching;

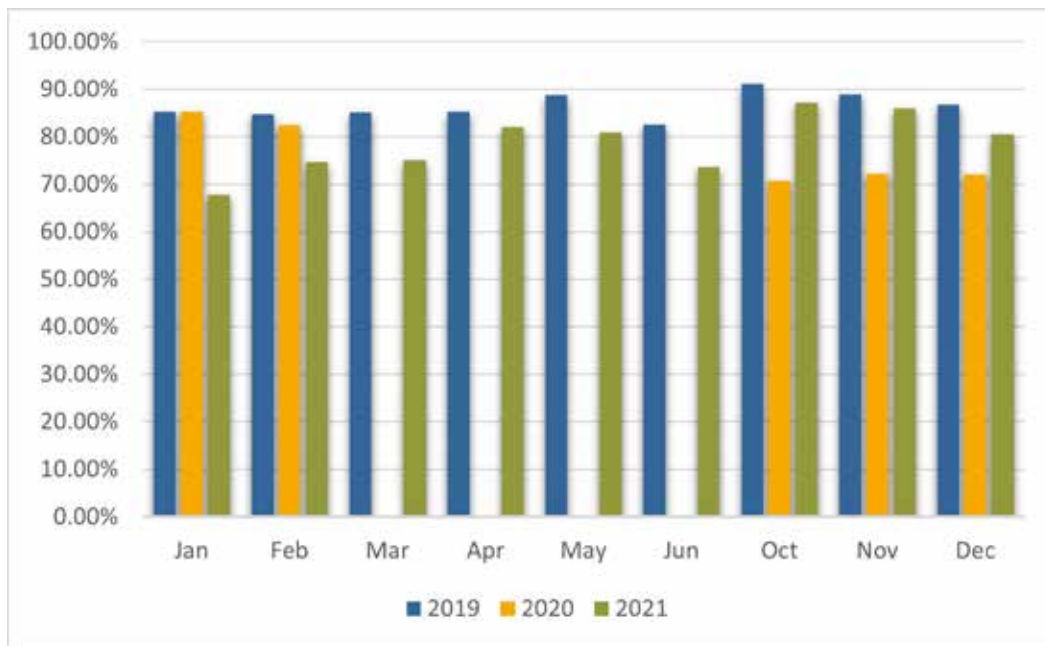
- v. ensured health and safety of students and employees within schools in accordance with public health directives.

5.3 The level of attendance plummeted when schools re-opened and lessons were carried out in a physical and online format

5.3.1 When the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Malta, parents were understandably reluctant to send their children to school out of fear that they might get infected with this virus. Schools resorted to online teaching for students to complete their syllabus, when all the schools in Malta and Gozo closed in mid-March till June 2020. When schools re-opened its doors for the new scholastic year, the NAO noted that in October 2020, the monthly average of student attendance plummeted by 20.47 per cent²¹ when compared to the 2019 monthly averages of student attendance. The NAO observed that overall, the average level of attendance throughout 2021 was 7.86 per cent less than the 2019 levels (Figure 7 refers).

²¹ Between March and June 2020, given the unprecedented situation, the procedures being adopted by different teachers varied greatly and there was no agreement on video conferencing-based classes. As a result, no official attendance was therefore recorded during this period. However, during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 scholastic years, there were instances whereby an entire class or a group of classes was receiving instructions online. In these circumstances, since attendance was regulated by a timetable, school attendance was duly recorded.

Figure 7: Monthly average % of attendance between 2019 and 2021²²



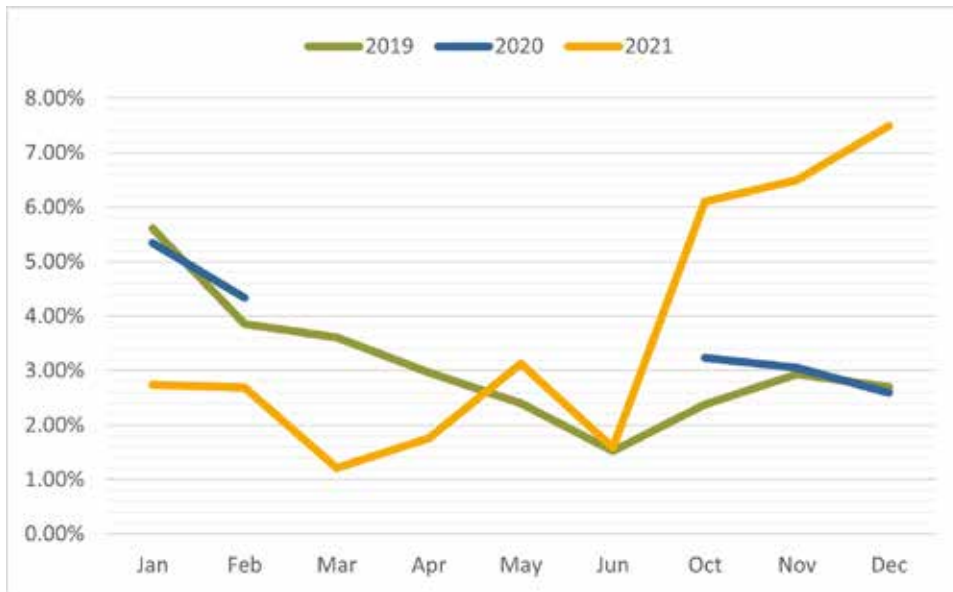
Source: MEYR

- 5.3.2 In this context, the NAO sought to determine the rate of absenteeism in schools in 2020 and 2021. This entailed benchmarking absenteeism levels with pre-COVID-19 rates.²³
- 5.3.3 When plans were underway to re-open schools in late September 2020, in time for the start of a new scholastic year, and the mandatory attendance in schools was temporarily lifted, given the unprecedented situation, parents were given the option not to send their children to school if the child or their immediate family members living in the same household were classified as vulnerable to repercussions of COVID-19.
- 5.3.4 Once schools re-opened in October 2020, parents were following the advice of the Health Authorities not to send their children to school if they have any symptoms (Figure 8 refers). In the event that a child becomes sick while present at school, schools had been instructed before the re-opening of schools, to set-up an isolation room (or office) within the school premises to isolate a sick child until his/her parents or guardians pick up the child from school.
- 5.3.5 Even though schools eventually reopened in October for the 2020/2021 scholastic year, and the Government was taking all the necessary health and safety precautions, the final decision was on the parents whether they should send their children to school or not.

²² MEYR made no distinction between those students who were physically present at school and those who were present in an online class between October 2020 and December 2021.

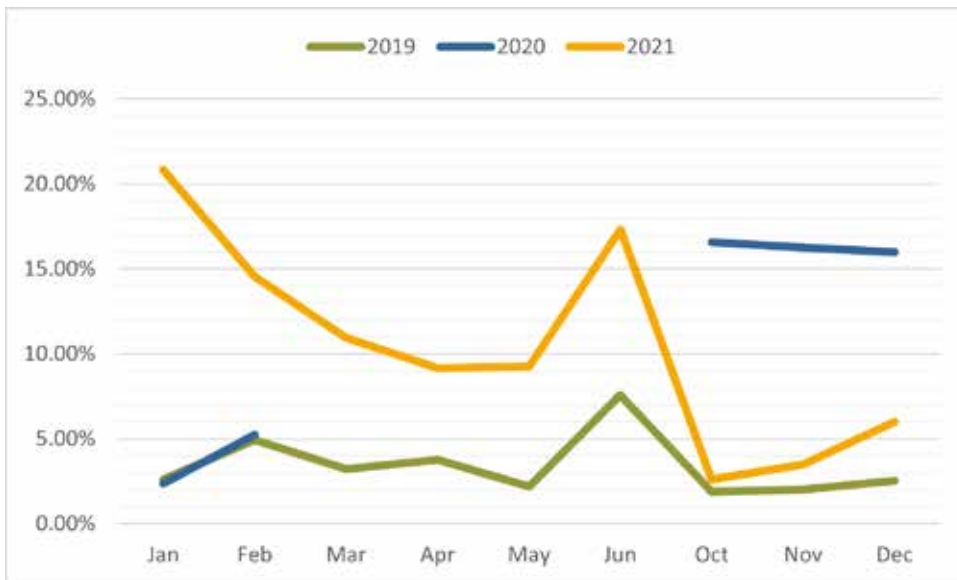
²³ As stated earlier, no official attendance was being recorded between March and June 2020 given the unprecedented situation.

Figure 8: Monthly average % of absence for medical reasons



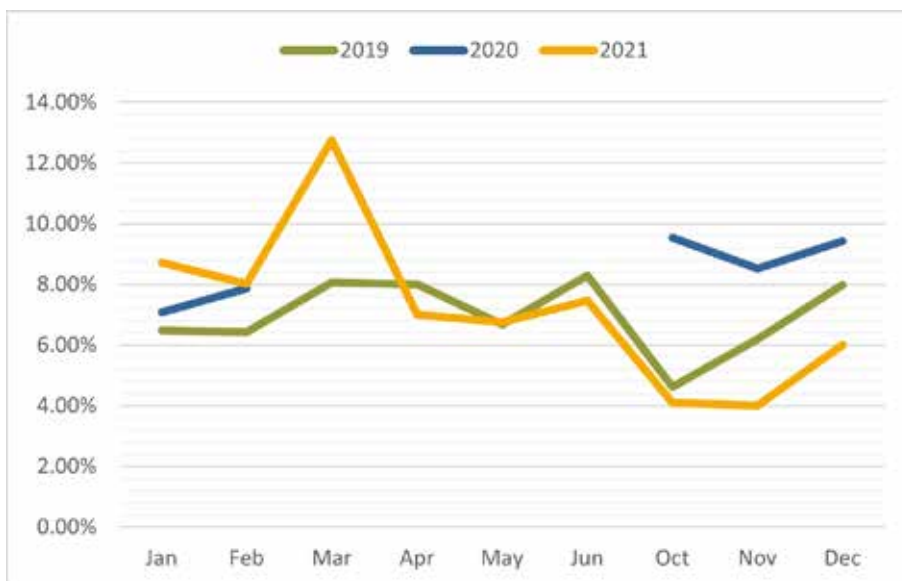
Source: Based on MEYR data

Figure 9: Monthly average % of excused absence



Source: Based on MEYR data

Figure 10: Monthly average % of absence without justification



Source: Based on MEYR data

5.3.6 As depicted in Figure 9, the monthly average percentage number of students who requested to be excused from school for various reasons, increased by 11.13 per cent during the 2020-2021 scholastic year when compared to the 2019 levels. On the other hand, the monthly average percentage of absence without justification for the 2020-2021 scholastic year between January and March 2021²⁴ exceeded 2019 levels by 2.84 per cent, but lower than the 2019 levels (-0.58 per cent) between April and June 2021 (Figure 10 refers).

5.3.7 Whilst the Health authorities continued to monitor the situation on a daily basis, in order to ensure the health and safety of all the students and education community, schools became mandatory once again, ahead of the 2021/2022 scholastic year, given that most of the educators and a good proportion of students were being vaccinated.

5.3.8 During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, all students have suffered in some way or another in their learning process, and unfortunately there were students who suffered more than others, impacting their education, well-being, social and emotional growth. Same applies to most of the educators who had to strike a balance between their professional duties and their personal life and see that their own children also get the necessary education. Given these extraordinary circumstances, teachers remained committed and focused to offer their students the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes, irrespective of their age, ability, readiness and motivation and method of teaching.

5.3.9 Unfortunately, most teachers in all sectors, including State, Church and Independent schools were realising some of their students required added support on certain basic skills and were concerned about the learning lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the

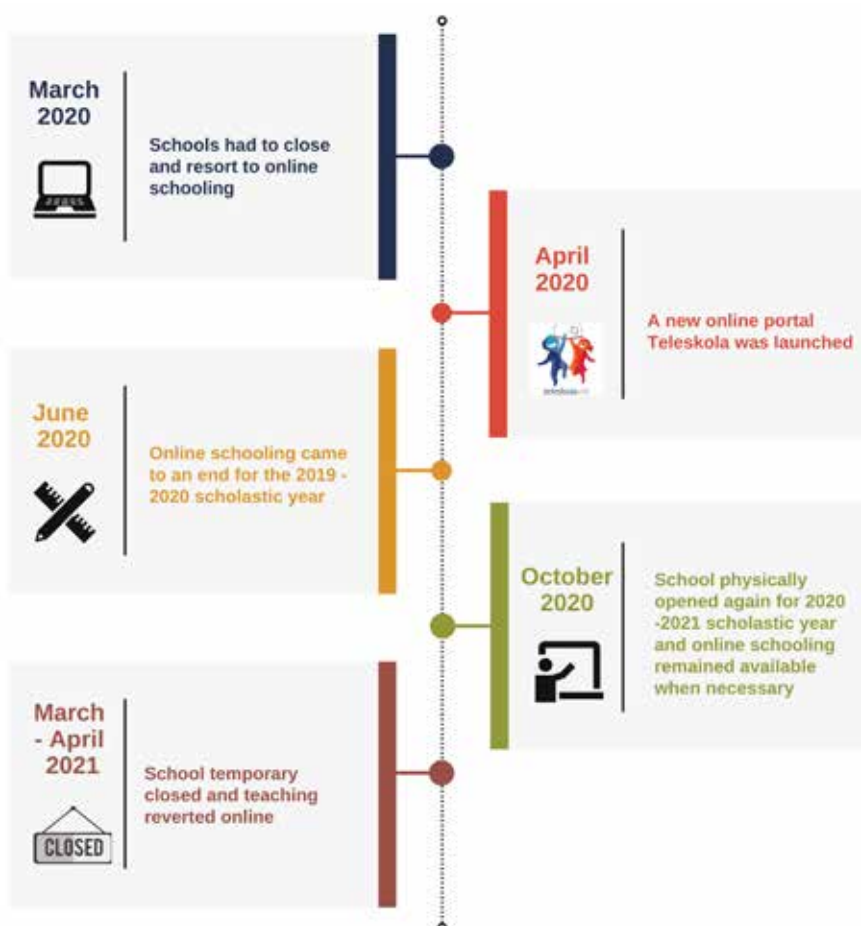
²⁴ Towards the end of February 2021 and the beginning of March 2021, the number of COVID-19 positive cases increased, and a number of COVID-19 restrictions were imposed. As a result, schools temporarily resorted from hybrid online and in-class provision to full online teaching from 15th March 2021 until the 11th of April 2021 (during this period there was a two-week break from school due to the Easter holidays).

Government allocated more than €250,000 for summer catch-up classes during the summer period of 2021 to help those students whose education was affected by the pandemic. The re-opening of schools in October 2020 was not only beneficial from the point of view of learning the curriculum but also for teaching soft skills and socialising.

5.4 During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the education authorities complemented physical teaching with online learning through various digital platforms

5.4.1 Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NAO was informed that the MEYR had already started planning and implementing online teaching and learning through its online platforms. All students and educators had access to a range of Office applications, email accounts and access to Microsoft Teams, where class groups were already created. Meanwhile, the Ministry started discussions with major stakeholders on how this pandemic might affect the traditional teaching in schools and what needed to be done for the rest of the scholastic year in the eventuality that schools had to close. During these discussions, there was a common understanding that the Ministry needed to find ways and means on how to enhance the existing online platforms and offer a better service to online students. In this context, Figure 11 presents a timeline of the key stages whereby the COVID-19 pandemic influenced MEYR modus operandi.

Figure 11: The key stages whereby MEYR had to adapt its modus operandi to ascertain business continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic



5.4.2 When in mid-March 2020 the schools had to temporarily close till the end of the scholastic year, the Ministry had to ensure that all the necessary online resources were provided to students and parents so that they could make use of them. However, the provision of these resources needed to improve both in terms of interactive facilities and also in the content available. As a result, towards the end of April 2020, the Ministry launched a new online portal, Teleskola²⁵ offering lessons and activities to cater for students from early ages, starting from Kindergarten, as well as Primary, Middle and Secondary schools. The portal’s aim was to provide easy access to appropriate lessons for each subject in every scholastic year to students, parents and teachers. Through this portal, one could find a wide array of resources in connection to the syllabus used by all the schools, whether it’s a State, Church or Independent school (Figure 12 refers).

Figure 12: Uptake of Teleskola online portal



Source: Based on MEYR data as at June 2022

5.4.3 It is to be noted that parents of children with dyslexia could also make use of this portal in order to communicate with experts, who could help them in their children’s learning processes. This portal is continuously being kept up-to-date with frequent additions such as PowerPoint presentations, recorded lessons, interactive sessions, online quizzes, reading materials and various other useful resources, which are being provided by education officers, heads of department, educators and by the Digital Literacy Support Teachers.

5.4.4 When the schools closed as a mitigation measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19 many students across Malta and Gozo found themselves receiving their education at home through online learning and had to adapt to the so called “new normal”. Different online collaborative tools were used in this regard, for the provision of online teaching. In this context, the Ministry had decided that all State schools should make use of its existing Microsoft platform (Office 365) and utilize Microsoft Teams for online teaching. Training and support on the use of Microsoft Teams²⁶ was provided to all learners, educators and even parents or guardians.

²⁵ <https://teleskola.mt>

²⁶ Microsoft Teams was the main software applications used for online learning, as it forms part of the Microsoft Office 365 suite which was implemented across all the state schools and Government departments way before the COVID-19 hit our shores.

- 5.4.5 The NAO was informed that Microsoft Teams, complements to the schools' existing online platform *MySchool*²⁷, which is used both in class and for online teaching and learning. As a result, since all the learners and educators were already registered online, the shift to online learning was carried out over a short period of time. Having said that, since most of the educators and learners were not accustomed to online schooling, the NAO was informed that the Ministry's IMU was inundated with a number of requests on issues with Microsoft Teams when the schools closed down (March to June 2020), and they assisted a number of teaching staff on any technical issues they might have encountered. Assistance was also provided to parents or guardians who were helping their younger children with online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online training sessions were also organised for educators, students and parents by the Directorate for Digital Literacy and Transversal Skills. Figure 21 depicted in Appendix III outlines the feedback received from the schools' administration and educators who gave their views and voiced their concerns on the concept of online schooling. As stated in the analysis of this survey, the NAO observed that whilst online schooling was beneficial to ensure continuity of the scholastic year during the COVID-19 pandemic, however children at the early years and children with special educational needs, had to be accompanied by an adult at all times, which was not always possible. In general, it was very difficult for these children to follow lessons on their own especially if their parents had to work remotely at the same time.
- 5.4.6 Even if schools re-opened for the new 2020-2021 scholastic year, the Ministry had to prepare for the uncertainty of how the situation might evolve during the course of this scholastic year. In this context, in September 2020, the Ministry initiated a process whereby lessons covering the entire syllabi of all the subjects offered in Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools were recorded and uploaded online on the Teleskola portal. These lessons were being recorded by teachers, following an expression of interest to participate in this initiative, so that students and parents/guardians as well as educators could access them On Demand. In addition, the Ministry also offered for the first time, virtual online classes to cater for vulnerable students or for students living with someone who is considered as vulnerable, attending Primary, Middle or Secondary State schools, to follow lessons according to their class timetable.
- 5.4.7 The NAO commends the initiative taken by the Ministry to offer the services of three virtual schools for vulnerable learners and respective educators in Primary, Middle and Secondary school level. In the case of these virtual schools, the Ministry was aware that the duration of the lessons had to be reduced, as the learners could not spend the same amount of hours in front of a screen similar to other learners who are physically attending lessons at school.
- 5.4.8 On the other hand, in the event that schools had to close again, and teaching is offered online instead, the NAO noted that the Ministry had issued a number of guidelines and also videos how educators, students and parents/guardians could make use of these digital platforms (i.e. Microsoft Teams and MySchool). In fact, the online survey showed that 77 per cent of the respondents feel that they are well prepared to offer online schooling in the event of another

²⁷ MySchool replaced the Fronter online platform, which was phased out in November 2020 due to its old functionalities that were no longer supported by the service provider.

closure of schools, since further resources have been provided and/or enhancements have been made to the existing digital platforms (Appendix III refers).

5.5 The Ministry faced a number of challenges to ensure that all the learners and educators return physically to school during the 2020-2021 scholastic year

- 5.5.1** To abide by the advice and guidelines issued by the Health Authorities, in maintaining social distance, the MEYR had to make all the necessary arrangements to ensure the health and safety for everyone before the schools could open their doors again for a new scholastic year. For instance, in Middle and Secondary schools, the students were accustomed to move from one classroom to another to attend a particular lesson prior to the COVID-10 pandemic. To avoid having groups of students moving from one classroom to another, it was decided that teachers had to move classrooms instead. This necessitated an increase in the number of classrooms to accommodate everyone, more staff allocated to these additional classrooms, as well as amending students' timetables and having staggered breaks to mention a few examples.
- 5.5.2** In addition, classrooms, laboratories and workshops were cleared to the bare minimum and the desks were kept apart to maintain physical distance between one student and another. As a result, practical lessons were temporarily halted, and a number of classrooms could not accommodate all the students in one class. Thus the schools' administration had no other option but to transform existing spaces into additional temporary classrooms. In effect, 65 rooms in all State schools were turned into classrooms with the installation of interactive whiteboards, projectors and internet connectivity. The NAO was informed that the costs for the above-mentioned changes was approximately €6,500. This cost covered mainly materials required for the civil works carried out.
- 5.5.3** The Ministry's IMU played a very important role in all the above, in terms of internet connectivity and in providing all the necessary hardware. At that time, the Ministry's IMU had initialised a hardware refresh program and some of the equipment used in these additional classrooms was hardware that was originally marked as obsolete but were still in working order. Such equipment was kept in stock as possible replacements and were re-introduced in the schools requesting any additional hardware.
- 5.5.4** Apart from interactive whiteboards, projectors and internet connectivity, the Ministry's IMU also had to equip these additional classrooms with other hardware, such as PC's and laptops. The NAO was informed that the Ministry had originally already awarded a tender, as part of the technology refresh programme, but due to unforeseen circumstances, there was an unexpected high demand of ICT equipment across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in delays in the shipment of these equipment. Since the Ministry's IMU had to provide such PC's and laptops in a short time frame, unfortunately they had no other option but to deploy all their new and 'old' hardware that they kept in stock. As a result, the Ministry IMU had to fix the old equipment until the tendered hardware arrives. The NAO was informed that this temporary workaround amounted to approximately €10,000. In the event

that the schools decide to keep all the hardware provided for these additional classrooms, the Government would need to invest an additional €180,000 to replace all these ‘old’ hardware with new devices. In addition, the Ministry IMU also provided free Internet services and a number of laptops as well as tablets to those students who were in need and didn’t own a PC or laptop to follow online schooling during the closure of schools.

5.5.5 Aside from the challenges to set up the schools and additional classrooms from an ICT perspective, the Ministry faced another challenge in terms of human resources, to ensure that each class (especially the additional 65 classrooms) is assigned to a particular educator. Initially, a call for expression of interest for educators of specialised subjects, referred to as peripatetic teachers,²⁸ was issued to gauge their interest in taking charge of a classroom rather than teach their specialisation. Unfortunately, only 25 peripatetic educators showed interest to be assigned to one of these additional classrooms. At this stage, the Ministry had no other option but to fill in the remaining vacancies according to seniority (starting from those educators who were recently appointed as peripatetic educators).

5.5.6 During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools also had issues with the management of their own resources especially in the event that an educator reported sick, and a replacement educator was needed to fill in. In the event that the schools’ administration did not have enough resources to replace educators who may have reported sick, the school had no other option but to offer online schooling to their students.

5.5.7 Apart from the above, State schools faced other challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the NAO survey, the respondents were given the option to select from a list of the major challenges the schools faced during this period and were also given the option to give their opinion on other challenges that they faced before and during the 2020-2021 scholastic year. In this context, the NAO noted that 80 per cent of the respondents opined that students with learning difficulties were finding it hard to follow online lessons, whilst 68 per cent of the respondents remarked that sharing a computer with their siblings was also a concern. (Appendix III refers).

5.6 Conclusion

5.6.1 Following the sudden closure of schools in March 2020, the primary aim of the Education authorities was that schools re-open for the 2020-2021 scholastic year and all the students return to school in a healthy and safe environment. The Ministry adhered to the advice and guidelines issued by the Health authorities and carried out risk assessments in all State schools prior to the reopening of schools for the new scholastic year. This brought with it a number of challenges and opportunities in terms of logistics (both human and ICT resources) and the need for digital platforms for online schooling.

²⁸ Peripatetic teachers are not normally assigned to a specific school but roam between different schools within the same College

- 5.6.2 When schools re-opened its doors for the new scholastic year, the NAO noted that in October 2020, the monthly average of student attendance plummeted by 20.47 per cent when compared to the 2019 monthly averages of student attendance, and the average level of attendance throughout 2021 was 7.86 per cent less than the 2019 levels.
- 5.6.3 During the closure period of the schools, the Ministry had decided that all State schools should make use of its existing Microsoft platform (Office 365) and utilize Microsoft Teams for online teaching. The NAO commends the initiative taken by the Ministry for offering the services of three virtual schools for vulnerable learners and educators in Primary, Middle and Secondary school level when schools re-opened again for the 2020-2021 scholastic year.
- 5.6.4 To adhere to the advice and guidelines issued by the Health authorities in keeping a safe distance, 65 additional rooms in all State schools had to be turned into classrooms. This brought with it the need of additional resources both in terms of ICT equipment and infrastructure as well as human resources, to ensure that each class is equipped and assigned to a particular educator.
- 5.6.5 The NAO observed that the level of communication in State schools needs to be enhanced. The NAO suggests that a standard means of communication is used between the Ministry and the schools' administration. In turn, the schools' administration should make sure that any kind of information that is received, such as circulars issued by the Ministry's Directorates, are disseminated to its own staff and ensure that everyone is kept in synch.
- 5.6.6 Whilst the concept of online schooling was beneficial to ensure continuity of the scholastic year during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, children at the early years, children with special educational needs, had to be accompanied by an adult at all times, which was not always possible. In general, it was very difficult for these children to follow lessons on their own especially if their parents had to work from home at the same time.

Chapter 6 | Concluding remark

- 6.1 This performance audit showed that, generally, Government, continued to provide critical and essential services throughout the pandemic. This conclusion is based on a review of the strategic direction provided by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the Ministry for Health (MFH) and the Ministry for Finance and Employment (MFE), as well as an evaluation of how two-line ministries, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children’s Rights (MSPC) and the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR) employed business continuity measures to deliver their essential services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic up to March 2021.
- 6.2 This performance audit confirmed that despite the emergency and abnormal circumstances, Government, generally adhered to governance principles. OPM assumed leadership responsibilities. On the other hand, MFH provided inputs regarding health and safety aspects while MFE provided financial and economic direction. This arrangement provided clear lines of responsibilities as well as the foundations for strategic development during these extremely challenging times.
- 6.3 This review found ample evidence of the depth of discussions of the various topics dealt with by the strategic framework. Generally, discussions leading to critical decisions were appropriately minuted and considered the input of experts, including those pertaining to international fora. The foregoing implies that mechanisms ensuring lines of accountability and transparency were appropriately in place.
- 6.4 Technology played a central part in ensuring business continuity. Within this context, MITA provided support to Governmental entities, which, in turn, permitted initiatives such as remote working and providing on-line customer interfaces to facilitate service delivery. MITA’s initiatives were complemented with the setting up of the servizz.gov portal. Indeed over the years and in particular during the pandemic, servizz.gov has managed to exploit the technological advancements made possible by MITA to bring the Public Service closer to the citizen. In the circumstances servizz.gov did its best to make the application forms easily accessible allowing the citizen to simply visit the online one-stop shop (servizz.gov). In most instances, the initiatives referred to herein were already planned or had been partially implemented. The onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated and broadened implementation of many measures which facilitated business continuity.
- 6.5 The scope of this audit extended to evaluating the implementation of business continuity measures within two-line Ministries. Despite their diverse business objectives and processes, to varying degrees both MSPC and MEYR managed to ensure business continuity of their core functions.

- 6.6 This performance audit confirmed that the processing and disbursement of social benefits was at par with the Ministry's pre-pandemic performance. Of note is that this Ministry, generally, managed process reengineering measures, such as the transfer of area offices business to servizz.gov, efficiently and effectively.
- 6.7 MEYR's task was logistically significantly more complex as it had to provide educational services to a diversity of students from various localities. Moreover, this Ministry introduced online schooling to continue delivering its services during the closure of schools or when students were not able to physically attend school. To varying degrees, these measures proved successful. Nonetheless, various difficulties prevailed. These were not only observed during the audit but a survey with teaching staff confirmed that due to a multiplicity of factors the provision of education both in traditional and online formats had to overcome significant challenges.
- 6.8 This performance audit showed that generally, Government entities managed to carry on delivering their core services. Equally as important was that Governmental entities adhered to governance principles to implement COVID-19 related principles. This audit focused on two line Ministries, but the National Audit Office (NAO) is cognisant that in some other cases, such as those related to health, business continuity translated in the provision of a considerably reduced level of service due to the prevailing circumstances, which were absorbing available resources. The NAO augurs that Government entities undertake postmortems to elicit the lessons learnt, particularly those related to processes which could be retained beyond the pandemic and to enable further updating of national contingency plans.
- 6.9 In view of findings and conclusions emanating from this audit, the NAO is proposing a number of strategic recommendations aimed at the public administration in general and specific recommendations for the line Ministries selected for this audit to mitigate risks and sustain good public governance in emergency situations. The recommendations of this report are presented in this performance audit, executive summary from page 11 to 13.

Appendix I | Scheduled payment dates of the sampled social security benefits

Appendix I outlines the scheduled payment dates for the eight social security benefits sampled for the scope of this performance audit. The sampled benefits include four already existing benefits and four new COVID-19 related benefits introduced in March 2020.

Already existing social benefits

Social Security Benefit	Year	Process Date	Payment	
			From	To
Two-Thirds Pension	2019	02-Jan-19	12-Jan-19	08-Feb-19
		30-Jan-19	09-Feb-19	08-Mar-19
		27-Feb-19	09-Mar-19	05-Apr-19
		27-Mar-19	06-Apr-19	03-May-19
		24-Apr-19	04-May-19	31-May-19
		22-May-19	01-Jun-19	28-Jun-19
		19-Jun-19	29-Jun-19	26-Jul-19
		17-Jul-19	27-Jul-19	23-Aug-19
		14-Aug-19	24-Aug-19	20-Sep-19
		11-Sep-19	21-Sep-19	18-Oct-19
		09-Oct-19	19-Oct-19	15-Nov-19
		06-Nov-19	16-Nov-19	13-Dec-19
	04-Dec-19	14-Dec-19	10-Jan-20	
	2020	01-Jan-20	11-Jan-20	07-Feb-20
		29-Jan-20	08-Feb-20	06-Mar-20
		26-Feb-20	07-Mar-20	3-Apr-20
		25-Mar-20	04-Apr-20	01-May-20
		22-Apr-20	02-May-20	29-May-20
		20-May-20	30-May-20	26-Jun-20
		17-Jun-20	27-Jun-20	24-Jul-20
		15-Jul-20	25-Jul-20	21-Aug-20
		12-Aug-20	22-Aug-20	18-Sep-20
		09-Sep-20	19-Sep-20	16-Oct-20
		07-Oct-20	17-Oct-20	13-Nov-20
04-Nov-20		14-Nov-20	11-Dec-20	
02-Dec-20	12-Dec-20	08-Jan-21		
30-Dec-20	09-Jan-21	05-Feb-21		

Two-Thirds Pension	2021	27-Jan-21	06-Feb-21	05-Mar-21
		24-Feb-21	06-Mar-21	02-Apr-21
		24-Mar-21	03-Apr-21	30-Apr-21
		21-Apr-21	01-May-21	28-May-21
		19-May-21	29-May-21	25-Jun-21
		16-Jun-21	26-Jun-21	23-Jul-21
		14-Jul-21	24-Jul-21	20-Aug-21
		11-Aug-21	21-Aug-21	17-Sep-21
		08-Sep-21	18-Sep-21	15-Oct-21
		06-Oct-21	16-Oct-21	12-Nov-21
		03-Nov-21	13-Nov-21	10-Dec-21
		01-Dec-21	11-Dec-21	07-Jan-22
		29-Dec-21	08-Jan-22	04-Feb-22

Social Security Benefit	Year	Process Date	Payment		Key Facts
			From	To	
Survivor's Pension	2019	09-Jan-19	19-Jan-19	15-Feb-19	Executive Summary
		06-Feb-19	16-Feb-19	15-Mar-19	
		06-Mar-19	16-Mar-19	12-Apr-19	
		3-Apr-19	13-Apr-19	10-May-19	
		1-May-19	11-May-19	07-Jun-19	
		29-May-19	08-Jun-19	5-Jul-19	
		26-Jun-19	06-Jul-19	2-Aug-19	Chapter 1
		24-Jul-19	3-Aug-19	30-Aug-19	
		21-Aug-19	31-Aug-19	27-Sep-19	
		18-Sep-19	28-Sep-19	25-Oct-19	
		16-Oct-19	26-Oct-19	22-Nov-19	
		13-Nov-19	23-Nov-19	20-Dec-19	
	11-Dec-19	21-Dec-19	17-Jan-20	Chapter 2	
	08-Jan-20	18-Jan-20	14-Feb-20		
	05-Feb-20	15-Feb-20	13-Mar-20		
	04-Mar-20	14-Mar-20	10-Apr-20		
	01-Apr-20	11-Apr-20	08-May-20		
	29-Apr-20	09-May-20	05-Jun-20		
	27-May-20	06-Jun-20	03-Jul-20	Chapter 3	
	24-Jun-20	04-Jul-20	31-Jul-20		
	22-Jul-20	01-Aug-20	28-Aug-20		
	19-Aug-20	29-Aug-20	25-Sep-20		
	16-Sep-20	26-Sep-20	23-Oct-20		
	14-Oct-20	24-Oct-20	20-Nov-20		
	11-Nov-20	21-Nov-20	18-Dec-20	Chapter 4	
	09-Dec-20	19-Dec-20	15-Jan-21		
	06-Jan-21	16-Jan-21	12-Feb-21		Chapter 5
	03-Feb-21	13-Feb-21	12-Mar-21		
	03-Mar-21	13-Mar-21	09-Apr-21		
	31-Mar-21	10-Apr-21	07-May-21		
	28-Apr-21	08-May-21	04-Jun-21		
	26-May-21	05-Jun-21	02-Jul-21		
	23-Jun-21	03-Jul-21	30-Jul-21	Chapter 6	
	21-Jul-21	31-Jul-21	27-Aug-21		
	18-Aug-21	28-Aug-21	24-Sep-21		
	15-Sep-21	25-Sep-21	22-Oct-21		
13-Oct-21	23-Oct-21	19-Nov-21			
10-Nov-21	20-Nov-21	17-Dec-21			
08-Dec-21	18-Dec-21	14-Jan-22			
05-Jan-22	15-Jan-22	11-Feb-22			

Social Security Benefit	Year	Process Date	Payment	
			From	To
Age Pension	2019	27-Dec-18	05-Jan-19	01-Feb-19
		24-Jan-19	02-Feb-19	01-Mar-19
		21-Feb-19	02-Mar-19	29-Mar-19
		21-Mar-19	30-Mar-19	26-Apr-19
		18-Apr-19	27-Apr-19	24-May-19
		16-May-19	25-May-19	21-Jun-19
		13-Jun-19	22-Jun-19	19-Jul-19
		11-Jul-19	20-Jul-19	16-Aug-19
		08-Aug-19	17-Aug-19	13-Sep-19
		05-Sep-19	14-Sep-19	11-Oct-19
		03-Oct-19	12-Oct-19	08-Nov-19
		31-Oct-19	09-Nov-19	06-Dec-19
		28-Nov-19	07-Dec-19	03-Jan-20
		26-Dec-19	04-Jan-20	31-Jan-20
	2020	23-Jan-20	01-Feb-20	28-Feb-20
		20-Feb-20	29-Feb-20	27-Mar-20
		19-Mar-20	28-Mar-20	24-Apr-20
		16-Apr-20	25-Apr-20	22-May-20
		14-May-20	23-May-20	19-Jun-20
		11-Jun-20	20-Jun-20	17-Jul-20
		09-Jul-20	18-Jul-20	14-Aug-20
		06-Aug-20	15-Aug-20	11-Sep-20
		03-Sep-20	12-Sep-20	09-Oct-20
		01-Oct-20	10-Oct-20	06-Nov-20
		29-Oct-20	07-Nov-20	04-Dec-20
		26-Nov-20	05-Dec-20	01-Jan-21
	24-Dec-20	02-Jan-21	29-Jan-21	
	2021	21-Jan-21	30-Jan-21	26-Feb-21
		18-Feb-21	27-Feb-21	26-Mar-21
		18-Mar-21	27-Mar-21	23-Apr-21
		15-Apr-21	24-Apr-21	21-May-21
		13-May-21	22-May-21	18-Jun-21
		10-Jun-21	19-Jun-21	16-Jul-21
		08-Jul-21	17-Jul-21	13-Aug-21
		05-Aug-21	14-Aug-21	10-Sep-21
		02-Sep-21	11-Sep-21	08-Oct-21
30-Sep-21		09-Oct-21	05-Nov-21	
28-Oct-21		06-Nov-21	03-Dec-21	
25-Nov-21		04-Dec-21	31-Dec-21	
23-Dec-21	01-Jan-22	28-Jan-22		

Social Security Benefit	Year	Process Date	Payment	
			From	To
Children's Allowance	2019	16-Mar-19	06-Apr-19	05-Jul-19
		15-Jun-19	06-Jul-19	04-Oct-19
		14-Sep-19	05-Oct-19	03-Jan-20
		14-Dec-19	04-Jan-20	03-Apr-20
	2020	14-Mar-20	04-Apr-20	03-Jul-20
		13-Jun-20	04-Jul-20	02-Oct-20
		12-Sep-20	03-Oct-20	01-Jan-21
		12-Dec-20	02-Jan-21	02-Apr-21
	2021	13-Mar-21	03-Apr-21	02-Jul-21
		12-Jun-21	03-Jul-21	01-Oct-21
		11-Sep-21	02-Oct-21	31-Dec-21
		11-Dec-21	01-Jan-22	01-Apr-22

New COVID-19 related benefits

Covid-19 Benefits - Payment Dates				
Year	Disability Benefit (CODB)	Medical Benefit (COMB)	Parent Benefit (COPB)	Additional Unemployment Benefit (COUB)
2020	28-Mar-20		28-Mar-20	28-Mar-20
	04-Apr-20	04-Apr-20	04-Apr-20	04-Apr-20
	11-Apr-20	11-Apr-20	11-Apr-20	11-Apr-20
	18-Apr-20	18-Apr-20	18-Apr-20	18-Apr-20
	25-Apr-20	25-Apr-20	25-Apr-20	25-Apr-20
	02-May-20	02-May-20	02-May-20	02-May-20
	09-May-20	09-May-20	09-May-20	09-May-20
	16-May-20	16-May-20	16-May-20	16-May-20
	23-May-20	23-May-20	23-May-20	23-May-20
	30-May-20	30-May-20	30-May-20	30-May-20
			06-Jun-20	06-Jun-20
			13-Jun-20	13-Jun-20
			20-Jun-20	20-Jun-20
			27-Jun-20	27-Jun-20
2021			27-Mar-21	
			03-Apr-21	

Appendix II | NAO survey

Background Information

1. Please state your designation *

- College Principal
- Administration (Head of School or Assistant Head
- Staff (Teacher, Learning Support Educator or Kindergarten Educator))

2. What type of school do you work at? *

- Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School

School Demographics

3. Which College do you form part of? *

[List of Colleges]

4. Which Primary school do you work at? *

[List of Primary schools according to the name of the College selected in Question 3]

5. Which Middle school do you work at? *

[List of Middle schools according to the name of the College selected in Question 3]

6. Which Secondary school do you work at? *

[List of Secondary schools according to the name of the College selected in Question 3]

The COVID-19 Pandemic within State schools

7. What were the major challenges the school had to face before the opening of the scholastic year 2020-2021? (Please select all that apply) *

- Additional IT resources were required (ex. interactive whiteboards)
- Lack of space in classrooms to maintain social distance
- Lack of educators due to additional classrooms
- Liaising with all stakeholders involved including, educators, parents, and trade unions
- Setting up of timetables to include staggered breaks
- To enhance the internet infrastructure within the schools' premises (ex. additional wireless modems)
- Other

8. To what extent were the public health measures adopted within the school premises? *

Poorly  Excellent

9. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, how do you rate the level of communication between the Ministry and the schools' administration throughout the 2020/2021 scholastic year and prior to the current scholastic year (2021/2022)? *

Poorly  Excellent

10. How well did the school (i.e. administration, educators and students) adapt to the new situation and adhere to the protocols issued by the competent authorities? *

Poorly  Excellent

11. With all the investments made in Information Technology (ex. the use of Microsoft Teams, Teleskola, My School, etc.) do you think that schools are well prepared to offer online schooling in the event of another lockdown? *

- Yes - educators and students have been through this and will adapt to this situation
- No - teaching should be carried out in class with the students present

12. In your opinion, what are your concerns with online schooling? (Please select all that apply) *

- Difficulties in chasing up students who are not submitting their assignments online
- Increase in workload on educators for the preparation of online lessons
- Keeping students motivated and gaining feedback during lessons
- Not all students have an Internet connection at home
- Not all students have a laptop, PC or tablet to join online lessons
- Not all students have a scanner or a printer at home to print and/or submit their assignments
- Some students have to share a computer with their siblings
- Students finding it difficult in accessing online material
- Students may feel disconnected from their educator as well as their peers
- Students with learning difficulties were finding it hard to follow online lessons
- Other

Appendix III | NAO survey results

Key
Facts

Executive
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Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Appendix

Background

For the purpose of this audit exercise, the National Audit Office designed and disseminated an online survey to all College Principals, Schools Administration and Educators within Government State schools, with the aim of gathering the respective opinions and gain a better understanding of the challenges the State schools had to face during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021.

Research methodology

Taking into consideration the logistical and time constraints in gathering information from the State schools' Administration and Educators, the NAO opted for a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods and conducted the survey with a number of close-ended questions. This approach was selected to obtain the necessary information and make it easier to analyse the results accordingly. In addition, the survey was prepared in an online format, using a third-party tool, to facilitate the data collection process and obtain an adequate response rate.

Target population

The survey was distributed to all the 10 Heads College Network, 69 Primary State schools, 12 Middle State schools and 20 Secondary State schools across Malta and Gozo.

Survey design

As already highlighted above, the online survey was created to cater for all Heads College Network, Schools Administration (i.e. Head and Assistant Heads of Primary, Middle and Secondary Schools) and Educators (i.e. Kindergarten Assistants, Teachers and Learning Support Educators) in each school and was divided into two sections:

- i. In the first section, the respondents were required to state their designation, the type of school they work in (i.e. Primary, Middle or Secondary) and from which College they form part of. Based upon their selection, the respondents were asked to choose from the list of schools that fall under that particular College. To facilitate inputting, drop down lists were designed for each of the above questions, and for each question branching logic was applied so that the questions displayed on screen change according to the responses of each of the above questions.

- ii. The second section was the central focus of this survey, to gain a better understanding on the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it across all State schools. All the questions in this section were mandatory and the responses were in the form of a mix of multiple-choice and Likert scale options.

This section aims to review, analyse and address the responses, and where possible, distinguish between the feedback given by the Schools administration and Educators separately.

Survey respondents and participation spread

The link for this online survey was forwarded to the Director General for the Department of Educational Services, which was then forwarded to the Heads College Network and all the Heads of Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools through a circular issued by MEYR. In this letter, they were instructed to distribute the survey to all Assistant Heads and Educators in their respective school and encouraged to participate. The online survey was open for responses for a six-week period and during that time, reminders were sent by the NAO to each Head of school either through an email or over the phone.

Following the six-week period during which surveys were open for responses, the survey was closed. The survey data was then downloaded, processed and the responses received from the College Principals, Head and Assistant Heads of Schools and Educators were grouped separately.

The survey elicited feedback from 1,451 respondents from a population of 6,762. This implies that survey results are to be interpreted at a confidence level of 2.3, when considering a confidence interval of 95 per cent.

As expected, the highest responses came from Primary State schools whilst the lowest responses came from Middle State schools (given the number of Primary State schools amounted to 69 when compared to 12 Middle State schools) – Figure 13 refers. When delving further into the spread of feedback received across the College network, it became evident that there was a lack of participation from the administration in almost all Middle State schools from the College network (even 0 responses from St Clare and St Nicholas Colleges), and even a lack of participation from Staff from Middle State schools at St Clare and St Ġorġ Preca Colleges with just one response each (Figures 14 and 15 refers).

Figure 13: Feedback received from Administration and Staff

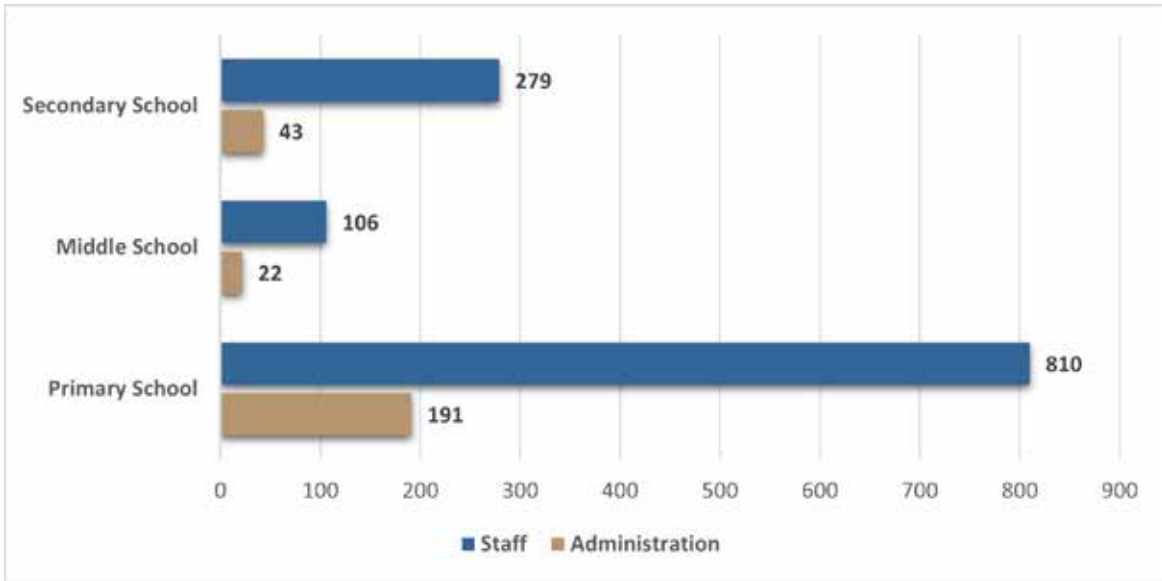


Figure 14: Participation spread across the College Network - Administration response

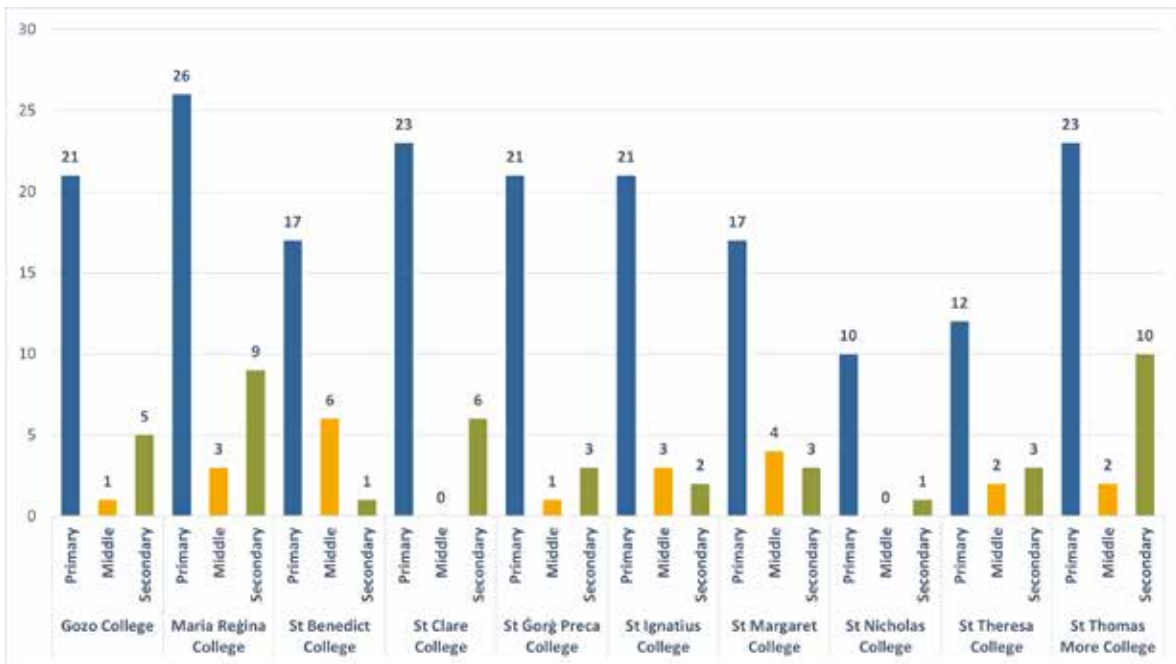
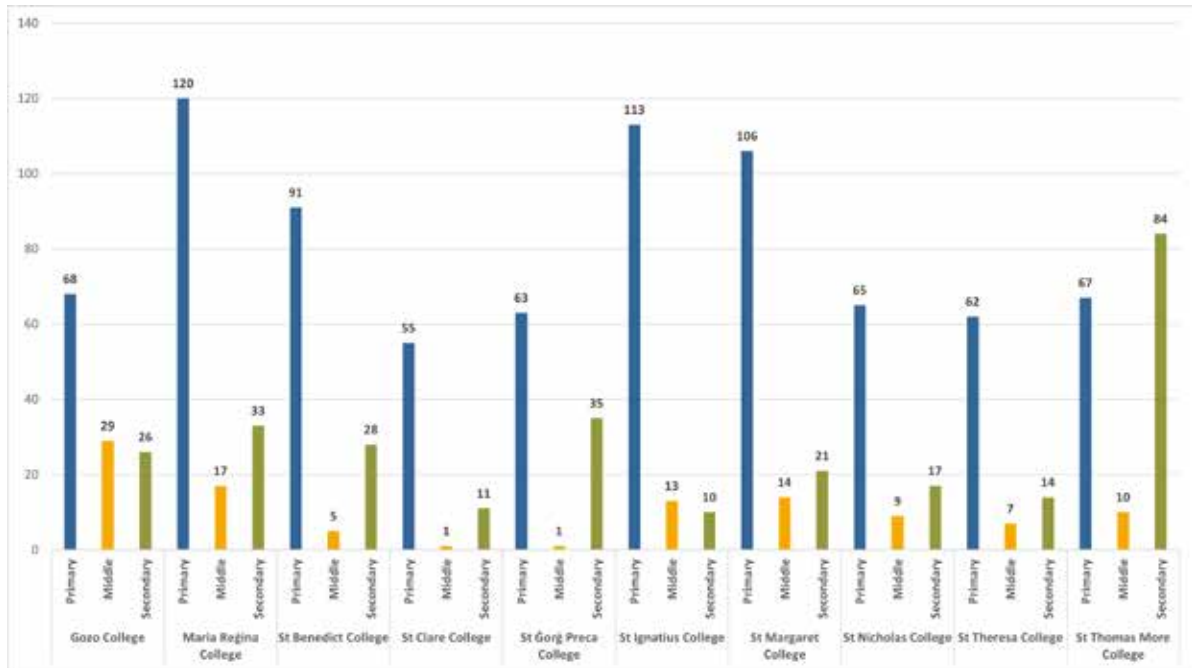


Figure 15: Participation spread across the College Network - Staff response

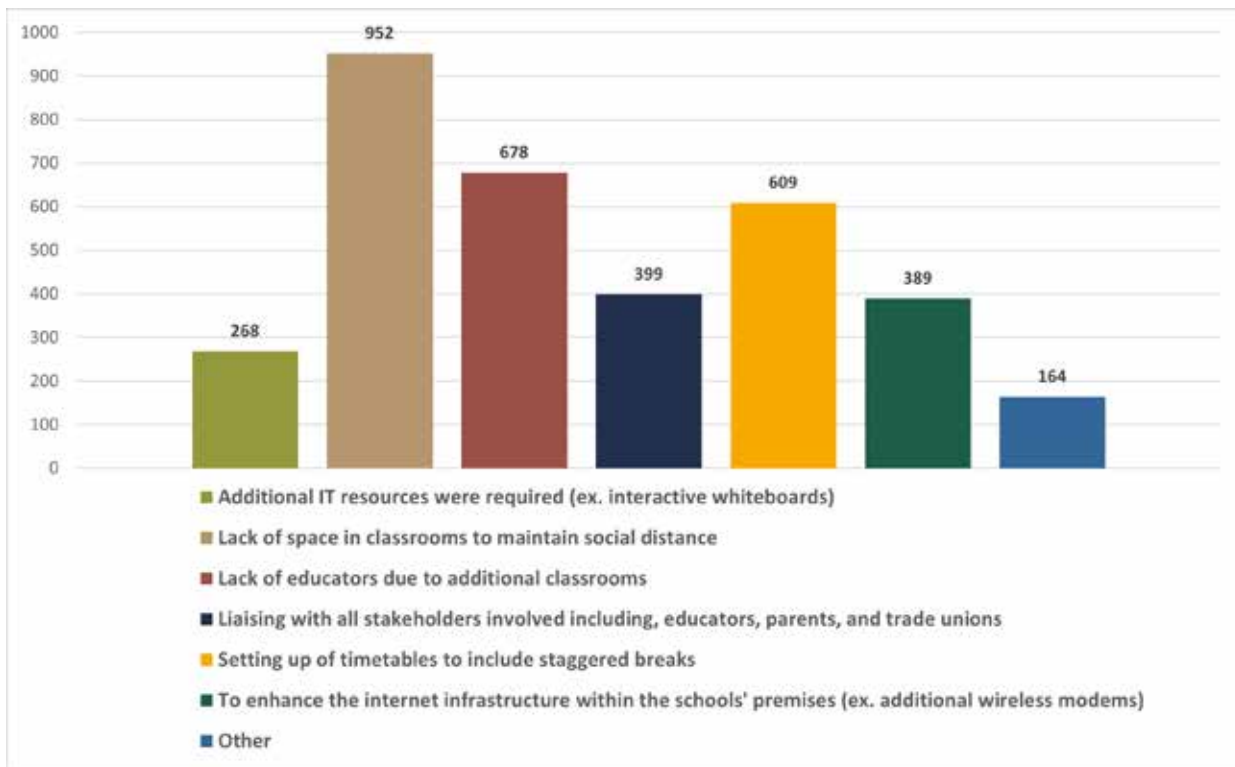


Analysis of survey

As highlighted earlier above, the scope of the NAO survey was to gain a better understanding on the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it across all State schools, the extent to which the Public Health measures were adopted within the school premises, the level of communication with all the relevant stakeholders and whether State schools are well prepared to offer online schooling in the event of another closure of schools.

When the respondents were given the option to select from a list of the major challenges the school had to face before the opening of the scholastic year 2020-2021, the majority (952 respondents) opined that the biggest challenge was the limited space available in classrooms to maintain social distance. In line with this, 678 respondents remarked that there was a lack of educators to address the needs of the additional classrooms that had to be allocated across the school premises, followed by 609 respondents (mostly from administration) who were of the opinion that their biggest challenge was the setting up of timetables to include staggered breaks to ensure that each class/year maintain its own bubble (Figure 16 refers).

Figure 16: The major challenges the school had to face before the opening of the scholastic year 2020-2021



The respondents were also given the option to give their opinion on other challenges that they had to face before and during the scholastic year. It was interesting to note that out of the 164 respondents who selected 'Other' and gave their views in free text, there was consensus on a number of challenges that they encountered (Table 7 refers).

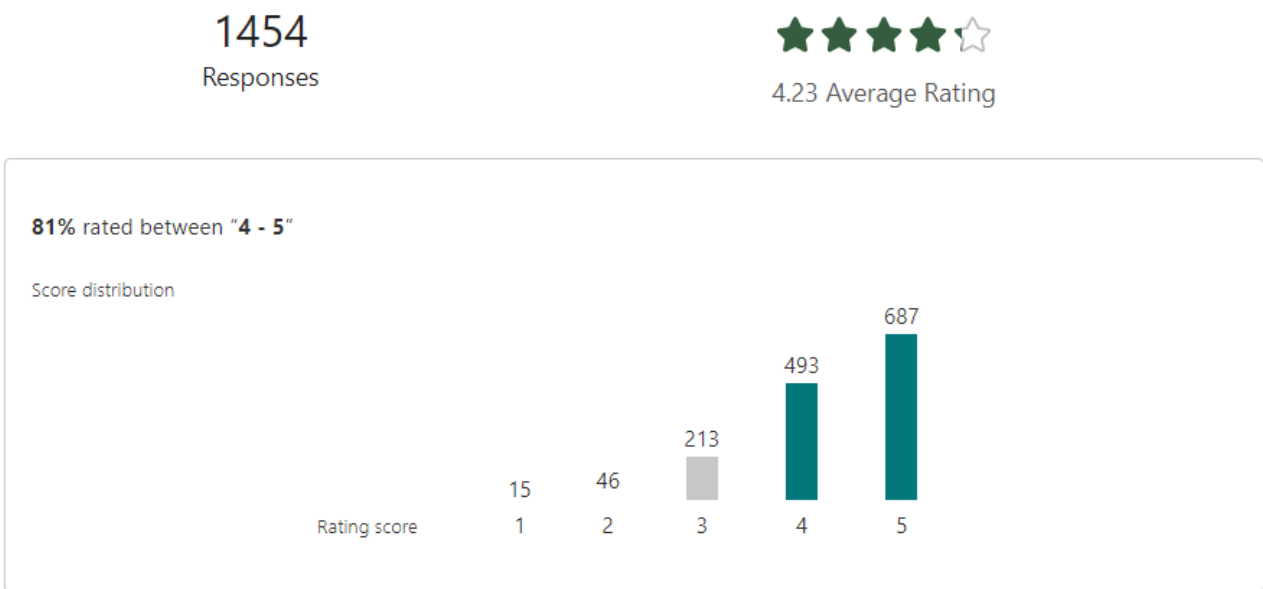
Table 7: 'Other' challenges that were raised by the respondents

'Other' Challenges
Too much noise pollution as halls were transformed into multiple classrooms using perspex or temporary gypsum boards
The classrooms had to be well ventilated and thus all the windows had to be kept open even in the cold winter months
Lack of storage and physical resources in classrooms as they were removed to make way for desks to be kept apart and maintain social distance
Preparing and setting-up the school to abide by the COVID-19 protocols
Resources (both human and physical) were very limited to support children with impairments and/or disabilities
Ensure that students comply in the wearing of facemasks and stay within their bubbles

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned challenges, when asked to rate how the school premises adopted the public health measures, 81 per cent of the respondents still felt that the school scored "very good" or "excellent" (4 or 5 rating) – Figure 17 refers. This shows that the reports that were mentioned earlier in this Chapter, namely 'Schools Logistics and Operations Implementation Plan' and

'*Il-Ftuħ mill-Ġdid tal-Iskejjel fi Żmien il-COVID-19*', together with the risk assessments that were carried out before the re-opening of schools for the new 2020-2021 scholastic year were instrumental in this regard.

Figure 17: The extent to which the public health measures were adopted within the school premises



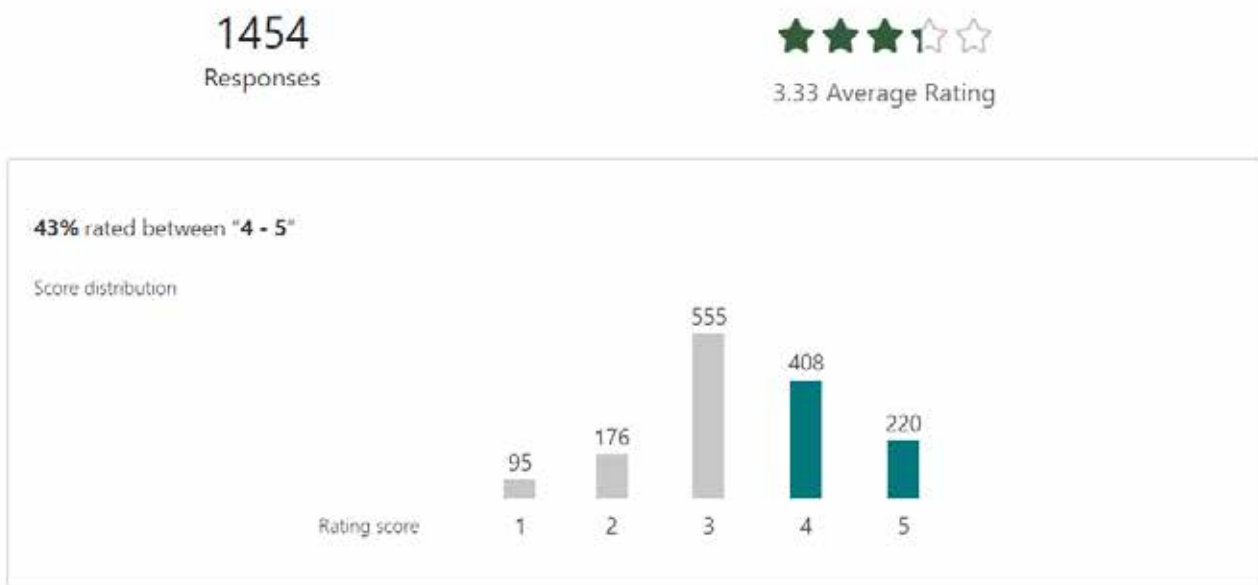
Similarly, 82 per cent of the respondents gave a rating between 4 or 5 when asked to rate how the administrative staff, educators and students adapted to the new situation and adhered to the protocols issued by the competent authorities, such as the wearing of facemasks, keeping a safe distance, maintain a good level of hygiene, etc. (Figure 18 refers).

Figure 18: How well did the school (i.e. administration, educators and students) adapt to the new situation and adhere to the protocols issued by the competent authorities



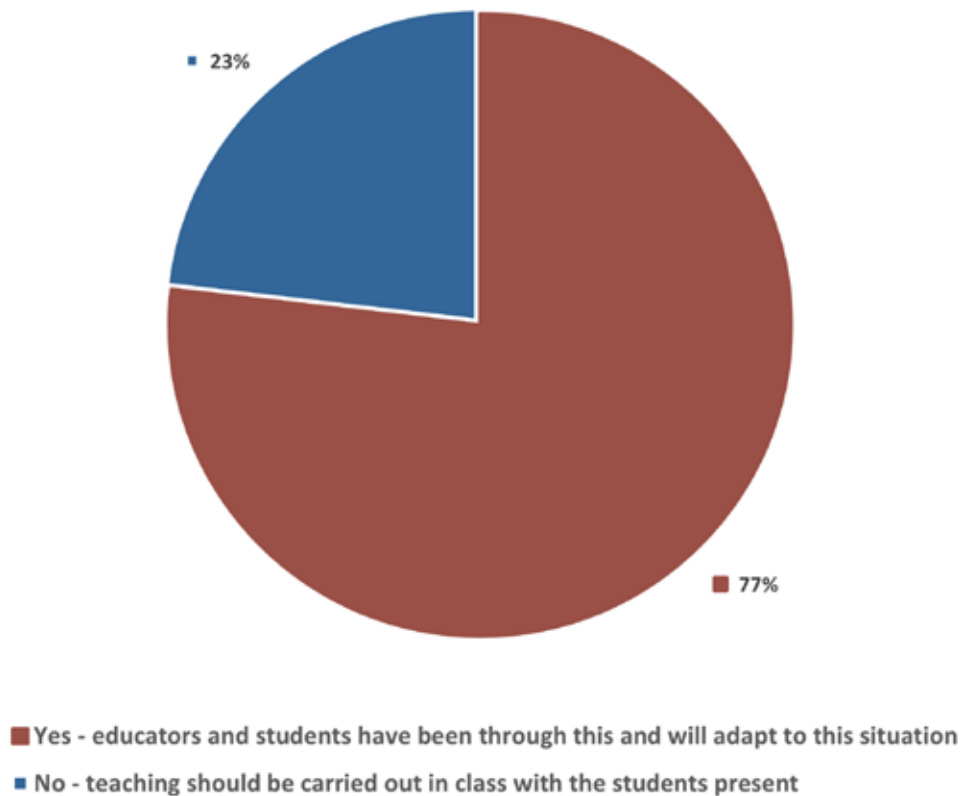
In terms of the level of communication between the Ministry and schools' administration, only 43 per cent rated it between 4 and 5 (i.e. very good or excellent), whilst 38 per cent gave a rating of 3 (i.e. good) - Figure 19 refers. Since the overall average rating was 3.33, this might indicate that the level of communication needs to be improved from the top-down level. In fact, when delving deeper into the distribution of the responses, the NAO noted that 13 per cent of the respondents, who gave a rating of 3 or less, formed part of the schools' administration, whilst 87 per cent of the respondents who gave a rating of 3 or less were staff (i.e. kindergarten assistants, learning support educators and teachers). In this regard, the NAO recommends that the Ministry should ensure that a common means of communication is used between the Ministry and the schools' administration. In turn, the schools' administration should make sure that any kind of information that is received, such as circulars issued by the Ministry's Directorates, are disseminated to its own staff and ensure that everyone is kept in synch.

Figure 19: The level of communication between the Ministry and the schools' administration throughout the 2020/2021 scholastic year and prior to the current 2021/2022 scholastic year



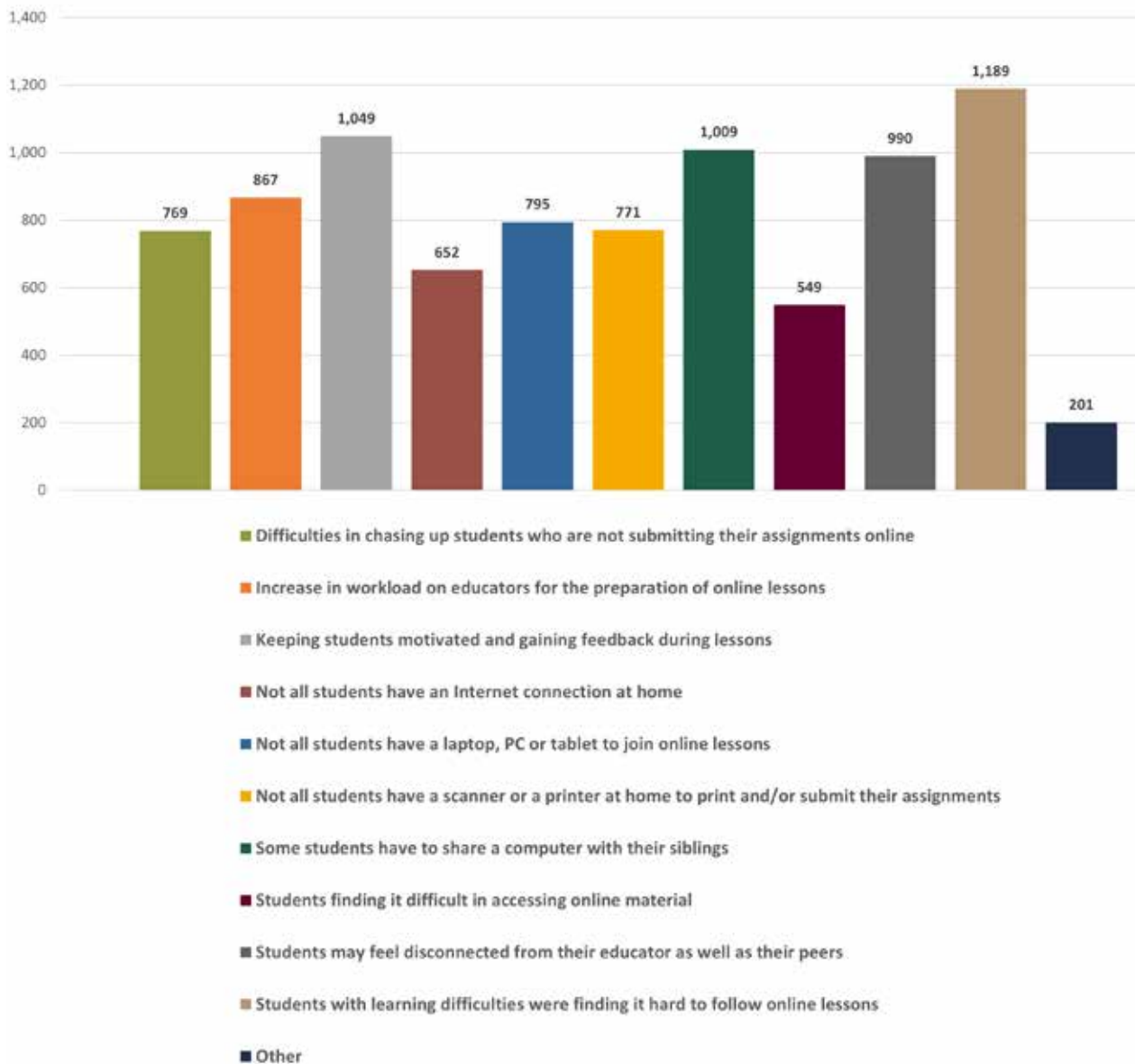
As highlighted in Chapter 5, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the MEYR provided an alternative learning platform with the use of various digital tools such as Microsoft Teams, Teleskola and MySchool amongst others. Notwithstanding that the schools re-opened for the 2020-2021 scholastic year, the education authorities continued to invest on such platforms in preparation for any possible future schools closure. For instance, the syllabus of all the subjects offered in Primary, Middle and Secondary State schools are nowadays being recorded and uploaded online on the Teleskola portal. As can be seen in Figure 20 below, 77 per cent of the respondents feel that they are well prepared to offer online schooling in the event of another closure of schools due to the pandemic, since further resources have been provided and/or enhancements have been made to the existing digital platforms. On the other hand, 23 per cent of the respondents opined that teaching should be carried out in class where both the students and educators are physically present and interact together.

Figure 20: Are schools well prepared to offer online schooling in the event of another period when schools are closed due to the pandemic?



Finally, the NAO asked the respondents to give their views and voice their concerns on the concept of online schooling, by selecting one or more from the list of options given. The NAO noted that 1,189 respondents opined that students with learning difficulties were finding it hard to follow online lessons. In line with this, 1,049 respondents highlighted that keeping students motivated and gaining feedback during lessons was their concern with online schooling, whilst 1,009 of the respondents remarked that sharing a computer with their siblings was also a concern – (Figure 21 refers).

Figure 21: Concerns with online schooling



Out of the 10 options given in the survey, 201 respondents voiced their concerns on online schooling and selected the 'Other' option. The NAO observed that whilst online schooling was beneficial to ensure continuity of the scholastic year during the COVID-19 pandemic, however children at the early years, children with special educational needs, had to be accompanied by an adult at all times, which was not always possible. In general, it was very difficult for these children to follow lessons on their own especially if their parents had to work from home at the same time – (Table 8 refers).

Table 8: 'Other' concerns with online schooling

'Other' Concerns
A new kind of misbehaviour (ex. children not switching on the camera or leaving their microphones on, not joining the lessons, not collaborating with their educators, etc.)
An uphill struggle for children with special educational needs who required one-to-one assistance
Difficult to communicate with foreign parents who may be assisting their children
Educators with young children found it difficult to cope with teaching and attending to their children's needs with online schooling at the same time
Online schooling is not beneficial for everyone especially children at the early years as they must always be accompanied by an adult (which was not always the case)
Practical subjects are harder to conduct online
Students being left alone and unattended
Students with no family support during online schooling or coming from a difficult social situation fell out of the system
Too many distractions at home - ex. other siblings attending online schooling or parents working at the same time

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