

ICA Country Report 2005

MALTA

1 Brief description of the Structure of the Government of Malta

Malta is a parliamentary democracy. It has been an independent nation since 1964, a constitutional republic since 1974, and a Member State of the European Union since 1 May 2004. The Head of Government, the Prime Minister, is the leader of the party that gains a plurality of seats in the legislature. The President, the Head of State, is appointed by the Prime Minister in consultation with the members of the Cabinet of Ministers.

At the present time, the main Government actors in ICT in Malta are the Ministry for Industry, Investment and IT (MITI), which is responsible for ICT and e-Government strategy and planning across the whole of government, including the public sector, as well as for Information Society matters; Malta Information Technology & Training Services (MITTS) Ltd, a company fully owned by Government that acts as its principal IT agency; and the Office of Prime Minister, which together with MITI and the Ministry of Finance is responsible for the final determination of ICT budget allocation to ministries and for approval of large ICT-related investments by public sector entities.

Information about the Government of Malta and specific details about the various ICT developments in Malta may be obtained from the following websites:

Government of Malta Portal: www.gov.mt
Ministry for Industry, Investment and IT: www.miti.gov.mt
Malta IT and Training Services Ltd: www.mitts.gov.mt
Department of Information: www.doi.gov.mt

2 The strategic approach adopted by the Government of Malta towards e-Government

There has been little change in this domain since the 2004 report. This information is being reproduced for the sake of reference.

e-Government Strategy

The Maltese government's **White Paper on the Vision and Strategy for the attainment of e-Government** (available at the URL: <http://www.cimu.gov.mt/htdocs/content.asp?c=34>) was adopted as government policy by the Cabinet of Ministers in January 2001. It envisaged a comprehensive programme to act as a catalyst for transforming Malta into an advanced Information Society. It established the principles that underpin e-government in Malta and created a strategic framework and identified the required changes and drivers for the implementation of e-government.

Malta established the eEurope+ Action Plan as its roadmap in 2001, followed by the eEurope Action Plan 2005, and ingrained their basic principles in its two major ongoing information society initiatives, namely the e-Malta vision and the e-Government programme (see 2004 ICA country report for details on key principles).

Legal framework

The main legal texts impacting on the development of e-government are those on Data Protection and Electronic Commerce.

The **Data Protection Act** was enacted on 14 December 2001 and came into force in July 2003. The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) is responsible to ensure that Data Protection compliance is achieved in all Government departments. A collaboration agreement was signed between MITTS and OPM. As a result, a

project team was established between OPM and MITTS to co-ordinate, advise and assist as necessary in the implementation of the data protection requirements in the Public Service, so as to bring Government departments compliant with the Data Protection Act.

The **Electronic Commerce Act** was adopted on 16 January 2001.

There is no specific legislation on “Freedom of Information” or “Re-use of public sector information”.

The full text (in English) of all Maltese laws is found on the website: www.justice.gov.mt.

National ICT Strategy 2004-2006

In July 2004, Government launched a National ICT Strategy for the years 2004 to 2006. The published document captured Government’s vision of where Malta will be by the end of 2006 in the ICT sector. The vision is complemented by an Action Plan with detailed objectives and a series of initiatives and programmes to help Malta attain that vision.

Malta aims to be one of the most advanced Information Societies in Europe and the Mediterranean through the use of technologies that improve quality of life for Maltese citizens and support the country’s economic growth.

The strategy is the result of a wide process of consultation carried out since the setting up of the National Information Society Consultative Council (NISCO), which includes members from civil society (KNPD, KSU, NCW, etc.), trade unions, industry (FOI, etc.), ICT companies (Vodafone, Melita Cable, ISPs, etc.), political parties (PN, MLP, AD) and Government (Ministries, etc.). After the achievements of the years 2000 to 2003 were analysed, including the eMalta project, a multisectoral strategy was drawn up for the coming three years.

The 13 Strategic Objectives for 2004-2006 are as follows:

- SO1: Step up the fight against the digital divide across all levels of society
- SO2: Promote and extend holistic ICT education and accessibility to technology
- SO3: Use ICTs to improve further the quality of life of all citizens and to impact positively on the tourist experience in Malta
- SO4: Use ICTs as an effective management tool within the public sector as an efficiency-realisation mechanism and as a vehicle to improve the quality of working life of public employees
- SO5: Proliferate the delivery of first-class, accessible and secure Government services
- SO6: Promote the ICT culture in SMEs with the objective of making them derive the benefits of introducing ICT in their operations
- SO7: Enable and empower the local businesses to gain access to the larger global market by participating in the eBusiness community
- SO8: Consolidate the external ICT environment
- SO9: Make the Internet a secure place; build confidence, trust and security in the use of ICTs
- SO10: Strengthen the local indigenous ICT private sector and support ICT entrepreneurship
- SO11: Internationalise the Maltese ICT industry to compete in the global environment
- SO12: Transpose the benefits of EU membership in the attainment of a first-class information society
- SO13: Promote the role and the contribution of the Maltese information society in the global ICT

The published Strategy document may be downloaded from the following URL:

<http://www.miti.gov.mt/docs/ITStrategy.pdf>

3 Organisational Issues

There are major updates in this section of the report.

Changes in ICT governance announced in June 2005

On 22 June 2005, the Government of Malta announced major changes in ICT policy following an internal review of its ICT operations.

The Ministry for IT (MITI) was designated as the official Government entity responsible for the setting of strategy, direction, management and monitoring of all ICT in Government policy operations, whether in the Public Service or the wider public sector.

The remit and operations of MITI and MITTS Ltd. will be solely and exclusively Government which means the Public Service, Authorities, Corporations, Agencies and commercial public sector entities in which the Government has a majority shareholding and which are not listed on the stock exchange.

MITI, together with the Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Prime Minister, will be responsible for the final determination of the ICT budgets to be allocated to line Ministries and to approve or otherwise investments in ICTs by public sector entities with a value greater than Lm 20,000 (circa EUR 46,600).

A Core ICT Advisory Committee, chaired by MITI, will be set up to ensure that the key stakeholders in the ICT in Government process are continuously involved in the decision-making process. The Committee will include, amongst others, senior representatives of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Finance and MITTS Ltd.

MITI will assist, directly or through MITTS Ltd, line Ministries and entities in the determination of their core systems requirements and through inter-Ministerial coordination, ensure that the investment made by each entity is maximised and utilised to the largest extent possible by other entities.

The role of the Central Information Management Unit will be integrated within MITTS Ltd and line Ministry functions.

MITI will retain its current role of e-Government leader from a strategic, championing and programme leadership aspects, with MITTS Ltd fully providing the support operations involved in the development and implementation of e-Government services.

MITTS Ltd will provide the following services to all Government and public sector entities:

- All core services including, *inter alia*, infrastructure, architecture, consolidated environments, storage, email, Internet, implementation and management of enterprise software and platforms, implementation and management of Relational Database Management Systems, disaster recovery, e-Government framework, portal services, authentication services, electronic payment gateway (EPG) and m-Government gateway;
- Integration of off-the-shelf solutions and technologies and provision of adequate resources such that MITTS Ltd could act as a trouble-shooter for the off-the-shelf solutions, hence reducing critical dependence and cost of support;
- Negotiation, contracting and management of all enterprise-wide agreements (including licensing);
- RFP development, adjudication and contract management for major systems;
- Information security, risk and crisis management and rapid disaster response capacity;
- Standard-setting, issuing of policies and directives, monitoring and compliance;
- Quality control of systems developed by third parties;
- Project management services;
- Management of the central service call centre;
- In conjunction with the Management Efficiency Unit, the provision of ICT-related BPR/change-management consultancy services to Government entities undergoing change processes; and
- Maintenance of existing legacy/bespoke applications/systems.

The most urgent objective for ICT in Government operations was determined to be the completion of the consolidation programme not only across Ministries but also in all public sector entities. This is considered critical on several counts: technological, operational and not least financial. MITTS Ltd has been designated as the entity responsible for the consolidation project and has been empowered to enforce its provisions accordingly.

The top priority deliverable in this regard was designated as the roll-out of VoIP, since this will result in significant tangible savings across all Government.

The current decentralised ICT funding system shall be revisited with the objectives of reducing total cost of ownership and ensure the maximum return of investment made by Government through its ICT expenditure. In this context, it is being proposed to replace the current model with:

- A core services allocation which will cover the provision of all the core services to Government (including public sector entities).
- A contained (and largely reduced) budget to line Ministries to cover their Ministry specific ICT requirements, minor purchases, desktop support, maintenance, etc.
- An ICT in Government capital investments budget to MIIIT which will be utilised to finance e-Government and any major investments to be made along the lines of the revised investment methodology. Capital investment budgets for the public sector entities will be planned at entity-level jointly with MIIIT.

The ownership of the ICT projects will remain with the line Ministries/entities.

The Office of the Principal Permanent Secretary will be issuing a revised Ministry information management framework which will determine the model with which Ministries will be running their internal ICT operations within this new strategic context.

National Information Society Council (NISCO)

The scope of the Council is to be as representative as possible and aims to bring together the major stakeholders who influence and are influenced by policy decisions related to the information society. Its terms of reference are the following:

- Monitor the development of the information society in Malta;
- Provide direct input to the development and implementation of the national information and communications technologies strategy;
- Devise structured initiatives on specific aspects, programmes or initiatives related to the development of the information society;
- Serve as a focused analytical forum on major information society themes;
- Serve as a vehicle for national networking, effort convergence and synergy attainment in the development of the information society;
- Facilitate the empowerment and extensive participation of civil society in all fronts of the information society;
- Ensure that all stakeholders in the public and private sectors and in civil society are informed of the major developments in the information society in Malta;
- Bring to the attention of all the stakeholders any concerns on specific situations or emerging problems in the local and global information society developments;
- Develop into an ICT knowledge-sharing platform;
- Serve as the national node for the World Summit on Information Society process;
- Actively participate in committees, fora and programmes of the European Union with a view of maximising the ICT-potential of Malta's membership in the Union; and
- Promote and facilitate the establishment of international partnerships between members of the Council and their international counterparts.

The Council has met eight times since it was set up in September 2003, and three times since the 2004 ICA Country Report.

At its **6th Meeting** on 15th October 2004, the Council considered several topics related to the development of the local ICT industry; these included:

- The role of Malta Enterprise in servicing the local ICT Industry and in attracting Foreign Direct Investment
- EU Programmes/funds for the ICT Industry
- Interaction between MITTS Ltd and the private sector
- The role of the IT Trade Section of the Chamber of Commerce in the further development of the ICT Industry
- The role of the Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology in providing an adequately educated workforce to the local ICT Industry.

Malta's ICT industry had made remarkable progress and compares well with the top European countries despite the constraints, particularly the limited size of the local market. The further development of the internal ICT market was discussed, and it was emphasised that Maltese investors have the same access to Malta Enterprise's incentive schemes as much as their foreign counterparts.

Malta's main strengths were deemed to be the availability of a fully qualified workforce at competitive prices, the relative ease to set up a business operation and the presence of an advantageous tax regime.

The Minister for IT encouraged local IT entrepreneurs to seek venture capital from overseas, particularly from EU institutions and member states, especially for innovative local ICT projects. The Government's role is being fulfilled by providing the right aid mechanisms to kick start ICT development and provide accessibility to ICT education. The Government intended to continue in its efforts to support the local ICT industry; entrepreneurs were encouraged to seek new ways of enlarging their current market base and enhance their competitiveness.

Web links: www.maltaenterprise.com , www.chamber.org.mt , www.mcast.edu.mt

At its **7th Meeting** on 18th February 2005, the Council focused on eBusiness; Government talked about the measures being taken to facilitate the proliferation of eBusiness and eCommerce, which may be viewed as management tools to maximise profit. The new eBusiness Action Plan was introduced to the Council. Presentations were also made by the Chamber of Commerce and Enterprise, the Federation of Industry, and the Malta Chamber for Small and Medium Enterprises.

During the meeting, the National Statistics Office (NSO) presented the results of a recent survey on ICT use by private Maltese companies. This showed that 97% made use of ICT; 46% of employees used ICT tools, while an average of 30% of employees used the internet in the course of their work. An average of 11% of employees were on teleworking, ranging from 9% in companies of 10-49 employees to 32% in those employing over 250. An average of 55% of enterprises use ICT for their ordering and purchasing. An average of 94% use the Internet as part of their working process. In the majority of cases Internet use was for information search and retrieval, including market monitoring. 33% of Internet use is related to the use of banking systems. 73% of companies have a website. In 90% of cases, the website is used primarily for marketing. In companies employing 10-49 staff, online sales accounted for 17% of their turnover, while in those with over 250 staff, this fell down to 3%. When comparing these figures with those from other EU member states, the NSO remarked that in many respects Malta was doing better than most countries, although not as well as Scandinavian states.

Link to eBusiness Action Plan: <http://www2.miti.gov.mt/docs/eBusiness%20Action%20Plan.pdf>

At its **8th Meeting** on 10th June 2005, the Council focused on eSecurity. It was agreed to set up an eCrime Working Group to discuss ways of implementing better security in the local information infrastructure. Government declared its intention to ratify the 2001 Council of Europe Cybercrime Convention and to strengthen related national legislation. Government is also preparing legislative measures against online grooming. The Minister for IT announced plans to set up a national 24-hour hotline for the reporting of abuse related to the Internet, as well as strengthening of the Police Cybercrime Unit. A discussion document on Internet Protocol version 6 (IPv6) was presented; a Task Force is being formed on the introduction of IPv6.

4 Operational Issues

Implementation and launching of MAGNET II

On 29 July 2005 the new MAGNET II Wide Area Network (WAN) became fully operational and effectively replaced the previous Government WAN.

MAGNET is the Malta Government Network, which connects all Government Ministries, Departments, Agencies, Local Councils, Schools, Police Stations, Libraries, Hospitals, Health Centres, Social Services offices and Embassies. Government-wide intranet connectivity is available to all entities connected to MAGNET. The new network, MAGNET II, supersedes the previous MAGNET in terms of fibre optic connectivity services to Ministries and Departments in the Valletta / Floriana / G'Mangia region. This new state-of-the-art network

presents a number of benefits to users compared with the current service. In particular, it provides enhanced bandwidth per site, offers better reliability through strict Service Level Agreements, 99.8% minimum site availability, and is more secure.

The need for MAGNET II came from the growing obsolescence of MAGNET, which over time was reducing the stability in performance of the Government Wide Area Network (WAN), leading to downtime which is not affordable given Public Service's dependence on ICT for its operations and business. MAGNET II is designed on current technology; its architecture allows for scalability and upgrading as and where necessary. Furthermore security, through secure tunnels and encryption, is an integral part of the design and architecture. Each of the connected sites has been provided with a second alternative connection, through a separate route to allow for business continuity in the event that the primary connection fails.

MAGNET II involved four years of work which included the network architecture design, negotiations with a private consortium of telecommunication transport providers, and the building of this network: the laying of fibre cable and installation and configuration of network equipment. The actual migration of MAGNET connected sites onto the new MAGNET II network was started by MITTS Ltd in April 2005.

Much preparatory work was done for the migration, involving various teams across MITTS Ltd and the clients: the Information Management Officers (IMOs) within the various Ministries. The migration of each site incorporated a switchover of the Local Area Network (LAN) onto the MAGNET II infrastructure. In addition to this and as a prerequisite all the IP addresses of all the hardware (such as work stations, printers etc.) on these LANs were changed to a new IP address scheme. The work was split into three phases, with dedicated teams responsible for each phase: pre-implementation (site preparation), switchover ('plugging' the site LAN on to MAGNET II and carrying out associated tasks) and post-implementation (on-site, tending to any user incidents and problems that may arise).

The architectural design and implementation of MAGNET II is a milestone for ICT in the Public Service. MAGNET II is an end-to-end initiative between MITTS Ltd and a Consortium formed between Maltacom plc and Melita Cable plc, and is the fruit of the collaboration of the best skills from these companies.

Agreement on all the points in the contract was reached in December 2003, leading to the signing of a 12 year contract with a total value of just over Lm3 million (EUR 7 million). The agreement also established a strong business model which allows the government to have an advanced network through the business framework of a "managed service". This allows the service fees to be paid throughout the duration of the contract as opposed to paying the full amount up-front. The agreement provides for a secure high-speed fibre-optic connectivity service to 59 government ministries and departments, including MITTS Ltd and its Disaster Recovery Site, all of which are situated within the Valletta, Floriana, Blata l-Bajda and Guardamangia area. The network is being provided for the government's own private and exclusive use, enabling it to make use of the latest ICT technologies. Each site is dual-linked for increased resiliency. 21 of the more critical sites have two fibre optic circuits passing through different physical routes. The remaining 38 sites are serviced through one fibre optic circuit and one ADSL circuit. The second (backup) circuit to each site is used to provide the required redundancy, giving each site a minimum availability of 99.8 per cent over successive 60-day periods.

The network itself is made up of a switched gigabit ethernet core with each site connecting to this core. The core in itself is resilient and provides sufficient capacity for all sites to operate at the maximum bandwidth allowed by the equipment. MAGNET II can carry an aggregate bandwidth of 10 Gigabits per second over a Virtual Private Network (VPN) connection that will be encrypted to the highest standards allowed by commercially-available equipment.

The two main sites, the MITTS Ltd Corporate Data Centre and the Disaster Recovery Site, each have a bandwidth of two gigabits. In addition these two sites are interconnected through point-to-point fibre optic cable. This provides the networking infrastructure for these two data centres to operate in an Active-Active mode, thus allowing full fail-over services to be deployed for the benefit of the government's ICT services and applications.

Extensive testing of the actual networking equipment was carried out throughout the summer of 2004. This testing was very exhaustive and covered in detail the various networking equipment that is employed across MAGNET II. The consortium built a mock set-up in a laboratory for the purpose, and extensive network simulation testing and failure scenario testing was also carried out.

Implementation of new Service Management System within MITTS Ltd

The implementation of a new Service Management System within MITTS Ltd during the past year presented an opportunity for improvement in ICT service to Government. The new system forms part of MITTS Ltd's holistic Service Improvement Programme driven by the Office of the CIO and supported by various business units throughout MITTS Ltd.

Provision of information from the Service Management System directly to MITTS clients and suppliers is considered to be one path through which distinct improvement is possible in service times and communication. Previously, email and other detached forms of communication had been used; the release of the Customer and Subcontractor Web Modules enhanced the process of direct dissemination of information from the central system.

The subcontracting of desktop support by MITTS Ltd to 3rd party suppliers has led to the development of new forms of relationship with clients. Those companies and individuals selected to carry out services on behalf of MITTS Ltd represent the company when interacting within the client, and therefore should be provided with all the assistance possible in the undertaking of their terms of reference. To facilitate this, MITTS Ltd enhanced and released the Subcontractor Web Module which is part of a Web Module package procured with the Service Management System. This module allows subcontractors to view, track and update calls assigned to them as necessary, increasing the management information available and the accuracy of service level reporting and tracking. The initial release was successful, as, through its use, MITTS Ltd and its subcontracted partners were able to target areas of concern and achieve steady improvement in the level of service provided to its clients.

The release of the Customer Module has provided MITTS Ltd clients with a simple interface with which to track the status of their service calls. It also allows clients either close their requests or re-escalate to the Service Call Centre if they believe the service has not been provided yet. This simple interface is an example of how MITTS Ltd should continue to involve and empower an increasingly IT-aware client with regards to the services MITTS Ltd provides.

Other modules are planned, to provide relevant access to calls, their status and other services provided. Two of these modules are: the granting of access to Information Management Officers (IMOs) to their respective Ministry's current calls held within the Service Management System; and specific access for specified St Luke's Hospital personnel to view and track their calls.

MITTS Ltd aims to use the System to enhance both its relationship with its clients as well as the efficiency of its service provision without extensive further investment.

Implementation of a Standardised Workstation Configuration across Government

During the past year, MITTS Ltd has been working to implement the Government's approved Standard Workstation Configuration for Desktop PCs within the Public Service. The technology used, Group Policy Management, is an integral part of Microsoft Active Directory (AD) Services which already has a corporate presence within the Public Service.

The Group Policy management solution offered by Microsoft AD Services allows administrators to define configurations for both servers and user machines. Local policy settings can be applied to all machines that are part of the Government Corporate domain. An administrator can use Group Policy to set policies that apply across a given site, domain, or range of organisational units (OUs) in the AD Service. Support for Group Policy is available on machines running MS Windows 2000 Professional and MS Windows XP Professional.

This AD infrastructure and Group Policy is primarily intended to increase the security of the computing environment running on the MAGNET and at the same time preventing unnecessary downtime.

Poorly coded software and user tampering with the workstation configuration are two ways in which an Operating System can be compromised. Viruses and other malware can also wreak havoc on a workstation, and although anti virus software should in most cases counteract their effect, another layer of protection is created by restricting access to the configuration settings of the workstation.

By limiting unnecessary tampering with the configuration of the workstation, MITTS Ltd administrators can take advantage of policy-based management in the following manner:

- Enabling centralised management of users and computers throughout the enterprise;
- Automatic enforcement of IT policies. This includes enforcing the users to logon to the Corporate domain, and installing Antivirus, MS System Management Services (SMS) and MS Software Update Services (SUS);
- Simplification of administrative tasks, such as system updates and application installations utilising MS SMS and SUS;
- Workstation administration and software installation/removal, limited to a pre-identified administrator;
- Consistent implementation of security settings across the enterprise. This includes the removal of administrative rights on the users' workstation, thereby preventing tampering with OS specific configurations. Users will not be able to install any software on their workstations. This in turn minimises support calls originating from this area;
- Efficient implementation of standard computing environments for groups of users. Group Policies enable the administrator to have complete control over the Windows user interface. This includes Desktop Themes, Wallpapers, Screensavers, etc. Although the current Government Workstation Standard does not cover these, they will be taken into consideration in future updates of the standard.

Group Policy can be used to define user-related policies as well as security, networking, and other policies applied at the machine level. With Group Policy and AD, IT administrators can implement standard computing environments for groups of users and computers. As a result, the users' experience of their workstation is one which runs at the optimum smooth performance level for a much longer time. User productivity and satisfaction can be significantly boosted while increasing administrator efficiency and reducing IT support costs.

5 Other issues

During the past year, many Government departments have launched new e-services, often through second-generation websites with enhanced content and functionality. The following is a selection. Another issue of note is the Vertical Strategic Alliance entered into by the Ministry for IT with Oracle Corporation, the latest in a series of VSAs with major corporations which include Microsoft, CISCO, and HP.

Online applications for Passports using E-ID data

On 30 June 2005 the Minister for Home Affairs and the Minister for IT launched a new e-service through which citizens could apply and pay for a passport online.

The format of passports is being changed in the near future to include a microchip to store a digital image of the passport holder, and that would eventually hold an image of the fingerprints of the holder.

Through e-government, the process of applying for a passport had been improved. The application form was made available for download, but it had still been necessary for the applicant to take the form to the Passports Office in the capital city, together with photographs, for the application to be processed. When the passport was ready, the applicant had to go again to the Office to collect and sign the passport.

Thanks to the new e-service, the applicant would only have to go physically to the Passports Office once at the very end of the process. All Maltese residents aged 16 and over may use the service. Payment for the passport may be made online, at no extra charge than before.

The identity of the applicant will be established through the use of the Electronic Identity (E-ID): the photo used for the passport would be the same as the one taken when the E-ID was issued.

This e-service is in line with the primary objectives of e-Government: 24/7 service, less time and effort spent on physical travel, consolidation of citizen data (including images), reduction in the cost of public administration through process integration.

Website: www.passaporti.gov.mt

Filing of Personal Income Tax Returns on-line

On 20 June 2005, Government launched an e-Service that enables taxpayers to file their personal Income Tax Returns over the Internet. The software for this application was developed by the IRD Project team at MITTS Ltd.

This is the fourth on-line service launched by the Inland Revenue department; at this stage it is a pilot project to get feedback from early users prior to launching more services aimed at individual taxpayers.

To use this service, taxpayers need to have the e-ID, which may be obtained from a number of Local Councils.

All the e-Government software for the Inland Revenue Department has been developed by the MITTS Ltd. IRD Project Team. The Inland Revenue has a successful set of e-Government initiatives with various services aimed at taxpayers, employers and tax practitioners. The services developed for taxpayers and tax practitioners use digital certificates for authentication.

Take-up figures are impressive: 78% of Corporate Income Tax Returns were filed over the Internet by October 2004, whilst employers' take-up for the FSS On-Line service was 65% as on February 2005.

The MITTS Ltd IRD Project Team has also developed software for the processing of on-line payments for the Inland Revenue for both the Electronic Payment Gateway and Internet Banking. E-Government is only one of the initiatives implemented by Inland Revenue with the support of the MITTS Ltd IRD Project Team. In April 2005, another initiative removed the need for filing any Income Tax documents for 30,000 taxpayers who are students or pensioners. Successful initiatives in the past were the Final Settlement System, the Self Assessment System and the Simple Tax Declaration.

Website: www.ird.gov.mt

New website for the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity

In May 2005, the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity launched a revamped website. This has been commended by the Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (FITA) for the accessibility features it incorporates for persons with disabilities. The site is very useful for people with visual impairment, dexterity problems or cognitive impairment.

The website provides online forms that allow eligible citizens to apply directly for Disability (and Elderly) Services. This is in line with the principle of helping persons with particular needs to access services from their own home and to continue living as independently as possible. The forms provide citizens with a selection of services such as those offered by Centres for Persons with Disabilities, Home Care Help and Telecare. They are accessible through the 'Disability' Service Cluster.

The major redesign of the website reflects the current portfolio of the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity, and is once more founded on a 'service clusters' strategy, originally created to make it easier for citizens to access information and services. Besides modernising service delivery, this approach has improved access through a 'single window' or seamless service across the various departments and entities. The original website adopting this approach had won the best Public Sector Website at the third edition of the Malta Web Awards (organised by Datastream Ltd). The design of the website and its maintenance is carried out by the staff of the Ministry Information Management Unit.

The website provides information on benefits and services relevant to the respective service cluster. These include information on eligibility, procedure, documents required, processing fees, back office process, contact details and Frequently Asked Questions.

The new service clusters 'Children' and 'Pensions' provide links to relevant information such as applications and contacts. The Pensions service cluster brings together general information in relation to contributory and non-contributory pensions whilst giving information about the White Paper on pensions.

The new Social Policy Information Centre (SPIC) service cluster provides a window to the SPIC call centre through which citizens can enquire about social services, including social security benefits, services offered to persons with disability, services offered to the elderly, those related to employed and unemployed persons, and services offered by government agencies *Appogg, sedqa* and *Sapport*.

SPIC offers these services through two automated systems available 24x7: the telephone system via the number 159 and the Internet – www.spic.gov.mt or www.mfss.gov.mt. Through these systems, customers can listen to and/or check the details of their employment history, social security benefits, payments received or those expected to be received within a short time, and also statements of the last 20 payments.

To access their Social Security benefit details directly and therefore benefit from a full personalised (confidential) service, customers need an e-ID (electronic identity card number). After registering for an e-ID, customers receive a PIN and password. Through SPIC, the central Government Portal www.gov.mt, or the MFSS User Profile section on the ministry website, users then gain access to the personalised services.

Website: www.mfss.gov.mt

New website for the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads

On 7 March 2005, the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads (MUDR) published its new website, which was the first website falling under the [gov.mt](http://www.gov.mt) domain to get the approval of Foundation for Information Technology Accessibility (Malta). FITA is the principal advocate and coordinator for making information communications technology (ICT) accessible for people with disabilities in the Maltese islands. Its information services assist disabled individuals in the selection, acquisition, or use of an assistive technology device, intended to increase, maintain, or improve the individual's quality of life.

The MUDR website's objective is to give insight into and keep the public abreast with the advancements on the two major long-term challenges falling under the remit of the Ministry, namely the upgrading of the country's land transport infrastructure and the facilitation of capital projects undertaken by the Government of Malta directly or in partnership with the private sector.

Amongst other features, the website contains an up-to-date traffic news service which includes details of planned road works on arterial and distributor roads and any traffic management measures in place. Also published onsite is the final development brief for the Dock No. 1 project in Cospicua along with the latest news on the project.

The website was designed by a Maltese company, Liquid Studios Ltd. part of the Techinvest Group.

Website: www.mudr.gov.mt

New portal for the National Statistics Office

On 1 March 2005, the National Statistics Office (NSO) launched a new NSO information portal. The NSO had been one of the first Government entities to launch a website. The new portal is a fully fledged online information system, the main features of which include online access to statistical databases, subscription to various online information services as well as online purchasing of information and publications. The web portal was designed and developed by a leading Maltese Internet services company, MaltaNET.

Website: <http://nso.gov.mt>

New website for the Office of the Ombudsman

In January 2005, the Office of the Ombudsman relaunched its website in a new format with more content and services than the existing site.

The site provides information on the institution's mission statement, its founding legislation, the Ombudsman's Charter, and a series of FAQs on the objectives, functions and work of the Office. The website also contains

various performance indicators of the Office of the Ombudsman since it was set up in 1995 and the latest publications of the Office and enables direct access to the website of the Ombudsman of the European Union.

A new feature is the electronic Complaint Form that can be downloaded for the submission of new complaints and emailed directly to the Office of the Ombudsman, although this does not yet obviate the need to send a printed and signed version of the complaint to the Ombudsman before the matter is considered further.

The content of the site was designed in a way that provides easy and accessible service to Maltese citizens and reflects the Ombudsman's commitment to bring the institution closer to the people by making citizens fully aware of their fundamental right to good and accountable public administration including the right to complain against any form of maladministration.

Website: www.ombudsman.org.mt

Vertical strategic alliance between the Government of Malta and Oracle Corporation

On 17 January 2005 the Minister for IT announced a new Vertical Strategic Alliance between the Government of Malta and Oracle Corporation. The Alliance sets the framework for the launch of a number of projects which seek to increase the level and employability of ICT graduates coming out of the University and MCAST.

The Vertical Strategic Alliance is in line with the Government's declared objective of supporting the development of an ICT incubation and proof of concept centre by forging alliances with major multinationals to provide their technologies in a lab environment. The Government also wants to identify companies which can be encouraged and supported to set up their ICT operations in Malta. It wants to encourage and support the local ICT industry in organising itself into specialised niche areas aimed at providing a comprehensive suite of services. It also wants to set up industry-leading ICT academies to engender the broadest suite of specialised skills in the local labour market.

Among the initiatives announced there was the extension of the previous arrangements made by setting up academies at the University, the Junior College and MCAST. Thanks to this alliance, Oracle will be fully sponsoring the training of trainers and providing the software for the institutions to offer the certifications to their students. Another initiative is academic pricing (with discounts of up to 90%) will be offered on a range of Oracle software which can be used by the educational institutions for their internal administrative requirements. A very important initiative is that a number of students will be provided with a work experience with Oracle during the summer months. Engagement of these students with the local ICT industry will also be sponsored by Oracle. Free Oracle software (the latest version of their products) will be given to students following ICT degree courses and certifications at the University and MCAST. These initiatives are focused on the National ICT Strategy targets of preparing 500 new certified ICT-specialists per annum by 2006, and increasing the direct ICT employment by 1,200 employees.

The VSA also has a role to play in Government's fight to eradicate the digital divide. These include the Oracle Workforce Development Programme will provide training for the unemployed and people seeking to re-enter the work-force and other considered at a disadvantage. 'Disadvantaged' people will be prepared for job roles which are in highly demand in today's knowledge-based society where commercial entities are using ICTs and demanding specific skills from employees. Oracle will also be helping to support young entrepreneurs and start-up companies, waiving all fees for local start-up companies to be part of its Partner Network. This provides start-ups with tremendous exposure through marketing and support to reach distribution channels which otherwise would have been unavailable. This will help in reaching the National ICT Strategy target of assisting at least 10 new ICT start-ups per annum.

One other important stream of the agreement is to help Malta make the most of EU Membership. Oracle will be sharing its expertise to help all Maltese stakeholders (including the private sector) tap EU funding for ICT projects under the various EU programmes in which Malta can participate. Partnering with international firms like Oracle is envisaged to increase the level of success of Maltese stakeholders have in EU projects. This will help in reaching the National ICT Strategy target of engaging in at least 20 EU-funded projects.

6 Three topics of prime importance to Malta's IT strategy at this time

The following were recently identified as priority topics in the Government of Malta's ICT policy formulation:

- i) Consolidation of ICT infrastructure and services
- ii) Information security management (including patch management)
- iii) Maintaining ICT investment levels in times of fiscal restraint

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