

**In pandemic times, access to offices, agencies and services of the Basque public administration needs improvement and reinforcement to ensure the effective enjoyment of rights and to fight digital exclusion**

During the past months, the Ararteko has been continuously receiving complaints from citizens who reported their inability to access services provided by different State and Basque public administrations, and which were, in some cases, essential for their well-being. Citizens reported public offices not responding to the telephone or not providing appointments through their on-line applications, as all available slots were taken. This made it impossible for them to introduce applications for much needed social and housing benefits or emergency aid, among others, or to submit documents requested by the offices.

Following the declaration of the health emergency by the Basque Government, offices open to the public, except those considered essential, closed, and the region went to a seven-week lockdown ordered by the Spanish Government. Once the lockdown was lifted and offices re-opened, they were confronted with large numbers of requests and applications by the public and by companies, for example, to be included in job retention schemes. It is in this context that citizens could not, in many instances, contact the offices in the first place to ask for information and advice, make use of the electronic channels put in place by the different authorities, or obtain appointments, which were made mandatory for any visit to a public office.

The Ararteko realised soon that the problems brought to its attention by the public were not isolated incidents but rather reflected a situation affecting many offices and services. Bearing in mind the efforts made by the competent authorities to alleviate the problems reported, but also the fact that the most vulnerable persons in society are those most severely affected by the inability to avail themselves of public support schemes, the Ararteko decided to prepare a report of a global scope. With its General Recommendation no. 4/2020, the Ararteko seeks to assess those aspects of the attention to the public which proved to be ill-suited to face the situation caused by COVID-19, as well as to provide guidance on measures for short-term improvement. The recommendations of the Ararteko to the competent Basque authorities are as follows.

1. Within the shortest delay possible, it should be determined what basic services need to continue to provide face-to-face service to the public imperatively in view of rising infection numbers and extant and future restrictive measures.
2. Authorities need to increase staff dedicated to face-to-face and telephone assistance services, instead of only reinforcing electronic access. In the case of particularly vulnerable groups, reinforcing telephone or otherwise assistance, including domiciliary assistance, is particularly important to ensure their access to basic services while safeguarding their health as well as that of public employees.
3. Access to information and advice must be ensured so as to enable the effective exercise of rights and the attendant use of the relevant public services. It must be borne in mind that certain persons or groups lack electronic devices or the digital skills needed to access the on-line information they need to access public support, do their business with public

bodies and exercise their rights. Alternative information channels which can cater for those persons affected by digital exclusion must be provided for.

4. Assistance to the public in the use of electronic means should be ensured, as prescribed by the Act on Administrative Procedure.
  - 4.1. Permanent help services should be set up to assist citizens in the business they need to do with public authorities. These services, whether on-line, telephonic or face-to-face, should be staffed with appropriately qualified professionals trained and enabled to provide advice, and equipped with adequate technological means.
  - 4.2. For persons in need of care or persons with reduced mobility, those living in care homes or those considered as high-infection risk groups, domiciliary assistance should be considered if no other measure can ensure their access to public offices and services while preserving their health.
  - 4.3. Help services should be provided preferentially in the premises of the pertinent public services. Those premises must be equipped with the necessary devices of free use and with open access to Wi-Fi Internet. Whether these premises are managed by public authorities directly or by contractors, public authorities must retain their regulation, direction and oversight.
  - 4.4. An alternative or complementary telephone support service should be established for those persons, bodies or companies who, according to the law, have to do their business with public offices electronically (particularly for those companies, self-employed or liberal professionals going through financial hardship).
5. Appointment should not be mandatory when citizens access public offices physically with the sole purpose of submitting documents. If, owing to the prevalent sanitary conditions at the relevant time, physical access to premises is not possible, there must be services accessible and available to assist persons lacking digital skills in the digital submission of their documents. Those services must be considered essential and guarantee full compliance with all hygiene and safety measures.
6. Requests for appointments at offices and services should be enabled through channels other than on-line, including by telephone, dedicated counters in public offices or automatic machines. Telephone lines should be for free, offer reasonable service hours through the day, and be sufficiently resourced in order to guarantee timely attention.
7. Basque public authorities should promote the provision of adequate technological means for families trapped in the digital gap, such as grants to improve access to the Internet. Likewise, enhancing the public's digital skills should be part of any direct action to close the digital gap.