

16.18 COMMUNICATION FACILITIES

- 16.18.1 Communication facilities are provided to public officers based on their status, nature of work or by virtue of their posting. Officers who are required to work from home in line with the “Work-From-Home” Scheme, are paid a Cell Phone Allowance and/or Internet Allowance, subject to the concurrence of their Responsible Officer. It is the responsibility of the latter to ensure judicious and prudent use of government funds.
- 16.18.2 In the 2021 PRB Report, the provision for grant of internet facilities was improved and payment of Internet Allowance was extended to officers in certain grades. These officers are required in the performance of their duties to regularly interact with international organisations or to carry out research away from the workplace, among others. The nature of duties of certain officers who use their mobile phone as a primary means to go online and have access to internet was equally considered when reviewing the criteria.
- 16.18.3 For this review exercise, Management and Unions have mainly requested to revise the quantum of Internet Allowance. The staff side also proposed to: grant a monthly mobile data package to officers who use mobile data for field duties; provide a mobile phone and phone allowance to officers who are required to be on-call and access the internet from outside the place of work; and grant communication facilities such as computers, laptops, internet and mobile phones. During consultations, they were apprised of the different existing provisions regarding such facilities, and their implementation, which rests with Management. They were also informed of the Circular issued by the Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reforms (MPSAR) regarding Internet Allowance.
- 16.18.4 The MPSAR proposed the payment of a Communication Allowance in lieu of Internet/Telephone Allowance and to prioritise the use of a unified communication and collaboration platform and video conferencing tool to enable departmental teamwork as well as support remote work and align with Government’s drive for a flexible, tech-enabled Public Service.
- 16.18.5 We have examined the demands of all parties concerned and retained those which are justified. We consider that while the grant of communication facilities is still required, there is need for meaningful use of these facilities to improve service delivery.

Fixed Telephone, Mobile Phone and Fax Facilities

- 16.18.6 For the purpose of enabling better communication and delivery of quality and timely services to our stakeholders, we consider that the existing provisions for the grant of fixed telephone, mobile phone and fax facilities are still valid and should be maintained.

Recommendation 1

16.18.7 We recommend that the grant of facilities with respect to fixed telephone and mobile phone as stated below should be devolved on Management of Ministries/Departments/Organisations, based on the officers' status, nature of work and posting:

- **Fixed telephone at residence along with free rental and unlimited/limited call entitlement**
- **Free use of mobile phone**
- **Mobile phone with unlimited/limited call entitlement**
- **Prepaid cards**
- **Free rental on mobile phones**
- **Roaming facilities on mobile phones**

16.18.8 We further recommend that notwithstanding the fact that fax facilities are provided at the workplace, senior public officers at the level of Permanent Secretary and above should be eligible for the grant of fax facilities at their residence owing to the specific nature of their duties and by virtue of their posting, subject to the approval of the MPSAR.

Internet Facilities and Internet Allowance

16.18.9 Internet facilities are provided to employees at the workplace with the prior authority of the MPSAR, depending on the need for internet access and based on the nature of activities of the organisation. Certain officers are also required to access the internet for official purposes after normal working hours at their place of residence or while being away from their workplace. In this regard, they are granted a monthly allowance, which includes a component of "mobile data", subject to satisfying a few conditions.

16.18.10 Pursuant to the provision made in the 2021 PRB Report regarding the grant of Internet Allowance, the MPSAR requested Supervising Officers of Ministries/Departments to submit their recommendations for inclusion of additional grades to the list of eligible officers as per its Circular Note No.5 of 2009, for the payment of same. Based on the justifications provided by the Ministries/Departments regarding the criteria provided in the last Report, the payment of Internet Allowance has been extended to other grades as per the MPSAR's Circular Note No.39 of 2022.

16.18.11 Requests for the review regarding this benefit are mainly related to granting a higher quantum and to rendering additional grades eligible for same.

- 16.18.12 After examining the evolution in the local prices of internet/mobile data packages, we consider that a moderate increase is warranted. As regards making a few other grades eligible for payment of the allowance, we hold that this responsibility should continue to be devolved upon the MPSAR. We have, however, broadened the qualifying eligibility criteria for the monthly Internet Allowance.

Recommendation 2

16.18.13 We recommend that:

- (i) internet facilities should continue to be provided at the workplace with the prior authority of the MPSAR; and**
- (ii) the monthly Internet Allowance payable to eligible officers, as per MPSAR's Circulars be revised to Rs 900.**

16.18.14 We also recommend that officers in grades requiring a degree or higher qualification and who are required to:

- (i) regularly interact with international organisations, after normal working hours; or**
- (ii) carry out meaningful research away from the office/workplace according to an established programme of work; or**
- (iii) access a server located at the office outside normal working hours while being away from their workplace, for meeting deadlines/tight schedules, or**
- (iv) put in extra hours of work on a regular basis to meet deadlines/tight schedules while being away from the workplace,**

may be paid the monthly Internet Allowance upon recommendation of the Responsible Officer of the Ministry/Department/Organisation concerned, based on strong justifications and subject to prior authority from the MPSAR and availability of funds.

16.18.15 For the purpose of implementation of the above recommendation, Management should ensure from the officers concerned, the production of outputs/results and their accomplishment in respect of the work carried out after normal working hours or while being away from the workplace.

16.18.16 Under the "Work From Home" scheme, officers who use their own computers/laptops or smartphones, are paid a monthly Cell Phone Allowance and/or an Internet Allowance. In a bid to avoid double payment, officers who are eligible for both the payment of Internet Allowance and a Cell Phone Allowance and/or Internet Allowance under the "Work-From-Home" Scheme,

are paid an allowance under one regime only, whichever yields a higher quantum.

Recommendation 3

16.18.17 We recommend that an officer who is eligible for the payment of an Internet Allowance as well as a Cell Phone Allowance and/or Internet Allowance under the “Work-From-Home” Scheme, as provided under the Chapter “Working Week, Flexitime, Workers on Shift/Roster/Staggered Hours and Overtime”, should be paid the allowance under one regime only, where a higher quantum is obtained.

Control Mechanism

16.18.18 Since public funds are involved in the grant of communication facilities, it is imperative that officers make judicious use of these facilities to achieve desired customer expectations. As a result, we consider it important for some sort of control mechanism to continue to exist.

Recommendation 4

16.18.19 We recommend that Management should continue to maintain adequate control measures and update same regarding the grant of communication facilities to public officers in order to prevent inappropriate and/or abusive cases of misuse of these facilities.

Effective and Consistent Implementation of Recommendations

16.18.20 For this Report also, various representations were made from different quarters to the effect that certain grades, on justifiable grounds, ought to have been included in the list of grades eligible for payment of an allowance related to communication facilities. We reiterate that the MPSAR should ensure a uniform and consistent implementation in all quarters.

Recommendation 5

16.18.21 We recommend that the MPSAR should ensure that recommendations are being implemented in a uniform and consistent manner in all quarters on grounds of fairness and equity.

Parastatal Bodies, Local Authorities and the Rodrigues Regional Assembly

Recommendation 6

16.18.22 We recommend that Parastatal Bodies, Local Authorities and the Rodrigues Regional Assembly should also be governed by the guidelines and policies applicable in the Civil Service for the grant of communication facilities.

