



**Report on the ‘Mystery Shopper’
exercise conducted for the *Citizen
Redress* NAO report**

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1. This web Annex sets out the procedures used in our small ‘mystery shopper’ exercise to examine the redress information available to phone customers and gives an overview of the results. We have excluded mention of the agencies or departments involved in each interaction since our focus is on the general picture and because a single interaction of course cannot be safely used to characterize any organisation’s response. (For instance, someone with the same query reaching a different operator in the same organisation, or the same operator on another day, might receive a much better or worse service).
2. We identified 18 major departments and agencies with strong relevance for significant customer groups and for each one we drew up a general enquiry script about making a complaint. Members of the study team then set out to ring up each organisation, in half the cases using the *Yellow Pages* directory and in the other half using a 118 directory service. (For this exercise none of our ‘mystery shoppers’ had web access). When the caller reached the organisation she sought someone to advise her on making a complaint, and when the correct person was reached followed through the short script for that organisation. For each organisation reached, callers also asked for leaflets and pamphlets and the time taken to receive them was recorded. The organisations covered were:

Child Support Agency	Countryside Agency	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Department for Education and Skills	Department for Work and Pensions	Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency
Driving Standards Agency	Environment Agency	Highways Agency
HM Customs and Excise	Inland Revenue	Jobcentre Plus
Learning and Skills Council	Immigration and Nationality Directorate (Home Office)	NHS Direct
Planning Inspectorate	Sports England	Passport Agency

3. To get some idea of how other large organisations’ phone systems work we also rang two large private sector firms delivering comparable services. For these organisations, we tested the process more fully, since it so happened that

our callers had genuine complaints to make, one on behalf of themselves and the other on behalf of someone else. These two organisations provide useful examples of both good and bad practice.

PUBLIC SECTOR EXPERIENCES

4. We identified five stages involved in finding out how to complain by telephone: identifying a telephone number to ring; making the call; reaching a relevant person; receiving explanations of complaints procedures; initiating a complaint (where it can be done by telephone); and obtaining further information.

Finding the Telephone Number

5. The exercise revealed some considerable difficulties involved in obtaining the relevant contact details for government organisations for someone without web access. Often there are specific complaints or customer service phone numbers listed on the web that are not given in telephone directories, nor easily found by directory enquiry services, nor generally known to staff within the organisation. In many phone directories, the listing of government agencies can be idiosyncratic and finding the right number can involve having an in-depth knowledge of governmental structures. For example, for one major agency there were two different addresses and numbers for the same organisation, with no indication of which might be the right one to call for which purpose. For one of the larger government departments we sought to contact there were five different contact points. Likewise, phoning directory enquiry services was difficult when shoppers did not know the correct name for the organisation or the town in which they were based. For example, one of our callers rang a directory enquiries service for the number of a (large) government department and was asked which town it was in. They answered 'London', because they didn't know – which meant that the person they eventually spoke to said they were unable to help until the caller could find out where the service she wished to complain about was based. For another organisation, the caller was given no number because they could not identify

the town and there was nothing listed under London. Some agencies have special national helplines for particular emergencies (like floods, for example) and these were helpful signposts which were easier to find by either route.

Making the Call

6. Having obtained a relevant telephone number, some of our callers had problems getting beyond an automated voice recognition (AVR) system or the main switchboard. One caller had to wait for nine minutes before speaking to anyone at all, another for four minutes. The AVR system for one very large organisation gave no option that appeared to suit 'wishing to make a complaint' and it was only by holding the line until an operator was eventually reached that it was possible to get any further. Another organisation had a very complicated AVR system with no 'customer services' option or even the option to speak to an operator by holding and our caller completely failed to get through via the telephone.

Reaching the Relevant Person

7. Many of our callers found it difficult to reach the relevant person within the organisation. In one organisation, the switchboard put the caller through to an answer-phone and on the second call, to a number where the person who answered said they were unable to help because the information provided was not sufficient for them to identify the correct extension to transfer the caller to. In another organisation the customer services team were not there on the day of the call, and none of the other people spoken to were able to provide any information at all, although they were very friendly. Officials from two large citizen-facing departments would not deal with callers, telling them they must go through a local office. In one of them, the caller was given the name of four local offices but the official was unable to identify the correct one that our caller should use. In another, the caller telephoned the local office directly, but had to call three times before she could speak to the relevant person. This person was very helpful and reassured the caller that she would deal with the complaint herself. But when asked about the timescales involved she said it

would depend on the severity of the complaint and that she ‘would get round to it’ when she completed her other work. The representative of a smaller department cut our caller off while she was in the middle of explaining her problem to tell her that the department was just not relevant and wouldn’t let her explain further. She gave the numbers of two organisations that might be relevant, but did not explain what they were, what responsibilities they had or why they might have anything to do with the problem.

Explaining Redress Procedures

8. In many of our cases, the information provided by officials responding to calls was vague and those answering calls could not outline redress procedures beyond the first stage of writing to customer services and (in some cases) the ultimate stage of writing to an MP and the Ombudsman. Mostly officials could give no indication of timescales for redress. Again we observed a difference between the information that is available to those with and without access to the Internet. For example, one of our callers was told by an organisation representative to ‘write to the Customer Services Manager’, but that they could not give a timescale for how long this might take to be resolved. By contrast, the same organisation’s website provides an extremely detailed account of the complaints process, including a progressive list of how to escalate a problem and how to contact different parts of the organisation. Much of the information provided on the telephone was obtained through a certain amount of coaxing; our callers knew the questions to ask and so got the information they needed. Most of our callers felt that it was questionable whether someone who had not been through this process before would get all the information they needed in one call.

9. One large department was the exception among our case studies, providing an example of best practice. The representative gave the caller the option of writing, telephoning or emailing their complaint and explained how the complaint would be fully investigated, not just be ‘fobbed off and ignored’. This official explained that the department would complete a report for themselves, so they could keep track of what was happening, and that our

caller would be sent a letter explaining what they thought had occurred - because one of the points of complaints was to 'learn from it, to try to make sure it doesn't happen again'. If they had made a mistake, they would give her an apology. Also, he emphasised that a complaint wouldn't be seen as a 'black mark against your name'. From our caller's point of view, everything about this conversation went right. The official involved specifically mentioned 'putting things right', 'learning from mistakes', 'apologising', making it easy to complain and recognised that it must be annoying for our caller to have to complain.

Initiating a Complaint

10. We found two types of organisation: those that had a policy of passing the caller over to their formalised complaint system (most usually in writing to the Customer Services Manager) as soon as possible; and those that had a policy of recording and resolving the complaint as quickly as possible without it necessarily going any further. The second group of organisations were extremely quick and efficient to record a complaint straightaway, even if the caller explained they just wanted to find out how to do so. One of our callers was explaining the problem to an 'information line' and could hear the respondent typing as she spoke. When she asked if she was actually in the process of making a complaint the official answering confirmed that he was already logging details. He took her mobile number and someone with the appropriate expertise to deal with the complaint phoned back within five minutes.

11. In some cases our callers enquired about making a complaint on behalf of a friend or family member. In general, organisations could give very little information to these callers, telling them the complainants must make the contact themselves. Our callers felt that this approach would tend to make finding out how to complain by phone almost impossible for someone very young, old, ill or non-English speaking.

Obtaining Follow-up Materials

12. Many government organisations were vague about whether there were any written materials available on redress or complaints procedures. In general, we found that most (although not all) of the agencies we called had information about complaints on their websites. A number of organisations told us they do not have any hard copy leaflets or information that can be posted out. For example, one of the largest government agencies claimed no longer to produce written leaflets, although they provide extensive material on the web including a dedicated email address for complaints and a telephone number that the official answering the phone was unable to arrive at. An official from a smaller but still sizeable agency could only recommend looking on the web, and seemed completely foxed by being told that the caller did not have internet access. The caller was eventually given the number of someone in the agency's head office, who seemed to our caller to be so uninterested in the call that he answered another call while our caller was still on the line. In all out of 18 agencies we found relevant leaflets promised for despatch in only three cases, of which one never arrived at the address given.

PRIVATE SECTOR COMPARATORS

A good practice example

13. Our callers looked up one organisation in a telephone directory and found all local numbers and a national customer helpline; a directory enquiries service also gave this national number. The caller was put through to an AVR system that gave several options relating to which part of the organisation was required and then another set relating to the type of query. Once the option had been chosen, the call was taken within 60 seconds.
14. The person who answered asked about the problem – which in this case was a real life one. She sympathised and confirmed a couple of details. She asked

how it had inconvenienced the caller and whether it had caused her to incur any costs. On being told that it had, she noted the amount and asked if the caller had ever experienced any problems with the organisation's service before. The caller replied that she had. The representative explained that she would have to talk to a specific manager to determine the locally based problem. She advised that because of the level of service the caller had paid for, there is a set maximum that can be reimbursed but that this amount will be sent by cheque as a gesture of goodwill.

15. When asked how long it would take to get a response, she said that she should have a reply from the relevant manager within 48 hours and that as soon as she received it she would contact the caller. She advised that if the caller was unhappy with the response then she should contact her again to look over the points addressed. She gave the name, number and address of two relevant consumer based organisations to contact if the caller should wish to escalate the problem. When asked for any additional information on the complaints procedure, she offered to send something in the post. The leaflet arrived two days later and the compensation three days later. The information was also available on the website.

A bad practice example

16. The number of the organisation was obtained from a directory enquiries service; it was not possible to find a relevant number in telephone directories. An AVR system gave three options; the first two were irrelevant and the third was to hold for an operator. The caller chose the third option and whilst waiting, was played an automated message (information about a forthcoming strike in the organisation) for two minutes. When the caller got through and said she wanted to make a complaint she was transferred to a relevant department, after holding for a further 12 minutes.
17. The caller gave the information about the complaint, and the respondent offered explanations for each of the points made. He said that it was not possible for the caller to make a complaint on behalf of anyone else; the

person who had the complaint must do it themselves and that they should be able to do so online. When advised that the complainant did not have access to a computer at home, he provided an address. He stated that there was no direct telephone number for the complaints department (although one is provided on the website) and so a complaint cannot be made by telephone. He said a reply should be expected within 3-4 working days of receiving the complaint (although the website stated within 14 days) and that the caller could expect a written apology. No compensation would be given, but there were various 'gestures' that the organisation might be able to make. When asked what could be done were the complainant unhappy with the response, he said that it could be taken straight to the Chairman of the firm. However the website stated that before doing this the consumer could contact the watchdog for the sector concerned. The caller was told there were no leaflets available, only the website, and this information was given only when prompted. The representative was quite friendly, but became defensive when any details of the problem were mentioned; he later apologised for his reaction, but the caller had the impression that the conversation might have become even more aggressive had she been an angry person making the complaint. The complaint was then made formally in writing, but after two months no response had been received.

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