Handling telephone enquiries

Scope and Methodology
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This report examined the provision of services through the Department’s contact centres which range from ordering forms to complex tax and benefit related queries and transactions. It examined the ease with which taxpayers can access contact centres, the quality of advice provided and whether the Department is running contact centres efficiently. The report focuses primarily on the 19 contact centres within the Department’s Customer Contact Directorate (the Directorate) which handle 95 per cent of calls to contact centres, and the seven contact centres managed by two individual business areas: Charity, Assets and Residence, and Debt Management and Banking. We have excluded smaller contact centres and calls handled in other offices.

Selected method

**Analysis of the Department’s performance data**

We analysed the Department’s contact centre performance data for 2007-08, 2008-09 and the first half of 2009-10. Where we followed up performance from previous reports, we also analysed data from 2005-06 and 2006-07.

The data we collected covered contact across all lines of business within the Directorate and the largest lines of business outside of the Directorate: Charity, Assets and Residence, and Debt Management and Banking. We did not examine other helplines run by the Department or local tax offices on the grounds of scale and limitations of available data.

We analysed:

- Daily/weekly/monthly call volumes received and handled by each line of business and contact centre;
- Performance against contact centre performance indicators, such as percentage of call attempts answered and percentage answered in 20 seconds;
- Staff numbers and cost of running the contact centres;
- Proportion of staff time utilised;
- Sickness absence and staff attrition figures;
- Internal quality scores, customer and staff satisfaction surveys; and
- Call duration.

Overall data was readily available, centrally managed and produced, and reliable.

Purpose

We analysed a range of performance data in order to:

- Assess trends in the Department’s performance over time, by business line and site and identify changes over time;
- Assess the Department’s service levels and availability;
- Assess how efficiently the Department is operating its contact centres;
- Assess the quality and accuracy of advice given; and
- Calculate the cost to the Department and to the customer of each call.
Selected method

Visits to contact centres
During March and April 2009 we visited ten contact centres covering the Directorate, Debt Management and Banking and Charity, Assets and Residence helplines. We selected Directorate sites to reflect the different sized contact centres, lines of business covered, location, history and where possible, performance. We visited the main contact centres for the other two directorates.

At each site we listened to calls for around three hours across almost all business lines (please see call listening methodology), and held separate group interviews with advisors, team leaders and quality staff (between eight and 10 in each group).

The sites visited were:
- Bathgate (Customer Contact Directorate);
- Bootle (Customer Contact Directorate and Charity, Assets and Residence);
- East Kilbride (Customer Contact Directorate and Debt Management and Banking);
- Glasgow (Customer Contact Directorate);
- Longbenton (Customer Contact Directorate);
- Manchester (Customer Contact Directorate);
- Merry Hill (Customer Contact Directorate); and
- Peterlee (Customer Contact Directorate).

Semi-structured interviews
We conducted around 20 semi-structured interviews with staff, including individuals with central responsibility for management information systems, demand management, forecasting and quality. We spoke to those responsible for providing and updating the guidance to which advisors refer when they answer calls. We also interviewed contact centre managers and regional operations managers.

We also spoke to the representative at the Public and Commercial Services Union responsible for HMRC matters.

Call listening
During the site visits we listened to around 90 calls handled by frontline staff across nine lines of business and ten sites. The information we considered in relation to each call included the line of business to which the call related, the reason for the call, the nature of any follow up action, and whether the call was potentially avoidable.

Purpose

We used the site visits to:
- Understand how the contact centres operate and the relationship between the centres and head office;
- Get views of staff on contact centres;
- Find out how much avoidable contact advisors experienced; and
- Observe the quality assurance process.

We used our interviews to:
- Understand how the Department manages the contact centres and how performance is reported; and
- See what data was available and how it was used within the Department.

To familiarise ourselves with the types of enquiries that advisors receive and with the IT systems and processes they use to provide guidance and advice. We also used it to understand the operational differences between the business lines.
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**Document review**

We reviewed internal Departmental documents relating to telephone contact. The documents we reviewed include:

- Progress against Departmental Strategic Objectives;
- Strategy documents, including analysis of performance data;
- Quarterly customer survey;
- Annual staff survey;
- Board reports on performance in handling customer contact;
- Business cases, project plans and evaluations of the pilots and initiatives relating to telephones;
- Information available to taxpayers from the Department, including the website and hard copy leaflets; and
- The Department’s research on customer segmentation.

We also reviewed literature from the Cabinet Office-led Contact Council, OFCOM, the Improvement and Development Agency and Citizens Advice.

**Interviews with external stakeholders**

We interviewed external stakeholders who represent the Department’s customers: TaxAid, Citizens Advice, and the Low Income Tax Reform Group.

We held interviews with government organisations including the Cabinet Office, the Driving Standards Agency, and Jobcentre Plus.

**Assessing the Department’s relative performance**

We commissioned contact centre specialists, Calcom, to assess the performance and practice of the Department’s telephone operations against a number of public and private sector benchmarks. Calcom used the Cabinet Office’s Performance Measurement Framework to benchmark the Department’s performance against other government contact centres, and other benchmarking reports to compare performance against the private sector.

We have drawn on Calcom’s work wherever it was possible to make comparisons with the Department. However, it was not always possible to benchmark the Department’s performance against public sector comparators because of a lack of comparable data across public sector organisations.

### Purpose

To inform our understanding of how the Department assesses its own performance and what future plans it has in place.

To inform our understanding of how the taxpayers whom external organisations represent regard the service provided by the Department’s contact centres.

Interviews with government organisations aided our understanding of current developments in handling telephone enquiries across government and how the Department compares with good practice.

To inform our understanding of how the Department compares to private sector and other central government departments.

Calcom’s work helped us to put the Department’s performance in a comparative context. It also provided us with a valuable insight into how other organisations measure performance and provided context for our performance data analysis.
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Modelling Contact Centre Performance

Using the Department’s data on call attempts, calls answered and staff utilisation, we constructed a model to analyse the impact on the Department’s call handling performance of change in the following variables:

- Staff utilisation;
- Levels of avoidable contact; and
- Number of staff.

Purpose

To estimate the possible range of performance improvements the Department could attain if it could improve its management of two key variables: avoidable contact and staff utilisation. The complexity of the Department’s operations, the number of changes taking place, and the impact of variables which have not been included in the model such as news items that generate unexpected call volumes, make it difficult to model precisely potential performance.

Advisory Panel

We established an Advisory Panel. Members were taxpayer representatives, tax experts and contact centre experts from the public and private sector:

- Mark Andrews (Cambridgeshire County Council)
- Paul Archer (Jobcentre Plus)
- Lynsey Brooks (Federation of Small Businesses)
- Siobhan Coughlan (Improvement and Development Agency)
- Professor Stephen Deery (King’s College London)
- Carole Evans (Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency)
- Sarah Fogden (Cabinet Office)
- Anne Marie Forsyth (Customer Contact Association)
- Donna Griffiths (Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency)
- Sebastian Horden (Confederation of British Industry)
- Katie Lane (Citizens Advice)
- Rob Pike (Customer Contact Association)
- Gerald Power (Cabinet Office)
- Anne Redston (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales – Tax Faculty)
- Chas Roy-Chowdhury (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants)

Representatives from the Department also attended.