



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

Better public services through call centres

**Twentieth Report of
Session 2002–03**



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Session 2002–03

*Report, together with formal minutes and
minutes of evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/committee_of_public_accounts.cfm. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Nick Wright (Clerk), Leslie Young (Committee Assistant) and Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary).

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Summary

Government departments operate over 130 call centres so that people can telephone to obtain information, purchase services and receive advice. The benefits for the public are that they should receive a quicker service, they do not have to apply in writing or visit an office and often they should be able to contact a call centre outside normal working hours. Efficiency can also be improved because less skilled staff supported by IT systems should be able to deal with callers' routine enquiries making it possible for more skilled staff to concentrate on complex work.

Departments' call centres cost just over £350 million a year and employ some 15,000 staff. Over the last three years the number of telephone calls has increased from 67 million to 95 million. On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General¹ the Committee considered the quality and cost of public services delivered through departmental call centres. We took evidence from the Office of the e-Envoy, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Environment Agency, the Driving Standards Agency and the Passport and Records Agency (the "Passport Agency").

Our key conclusions are:

- Call centres provide opportunities to deliver a range of public services more quickly and at times more convenient to people. To provide a prompt and reliable service departments need to estimate the likely volume and incidence of calls and ensure they can handle demand through the most cost effective balance of flexible staffing, automated electronic responses, or alternatively outsourcing part of the service.
- Existing quality of service measures tend to focus on the speed with which calls are answered and whether the enquiry was handled courteously. To obtain a more reliable assessment of service quality departments should also monitor and assess the extent to which advice provided was accurate and complete.
- Nearly half of departments' call centres lack sufficiently complete information on the full cost and time it takes to deal with calls. Without such information departments cannot determine whether their costs are reasonable or consider options for reducing costs by reengineering existing ways of working or by amalgamating with other call centres.
- While it is for departments to decide whether to set up a call centre, the Office of the e-Envoy is responsible for electronic government strategy which includes call centres. The Office has, however, limited information on the performance of call centres and the quality of service which they deliver. The Office needs to obtain reliable data to benchmark call centre performance, identify and spread good practice and press departments to tackle poor quality service where it exists.

1 C&AG's Report, *Using call centres to deliver public services* (HC 134, Session 2002–03)

1 The role of the Office of the e-Envoy

1. Departments and their agencies are responsible for deciding whether to set up a call centre. No one central organisation has policy responsibility for call centres but departments can draw on advice from the Office of Government Commerce, COI Communications (formerly the Central Office of Information) and the Office of the e-Envoy. The latter is responsible for formulating common policies and guidelines, and for monitoring departments' implementation of electronic government which includes call centres. In May 2002 the Office issued guidelines supporting the use of call centres as a means of delivering services more cost effectively. The guidelines specify that the Cabinet Office will carry out reviews of departments' use of call centres and that compliance with the guidelines will form part of these reviews.²

2. Asked why no reviews had taken place, the Office of the e-Envoy said that when the guidelines were originally issued a number of government agencies were responsible for enforcing them including the Cabinet Office. Responsibility for monitoring compliance had become unclear following subsequent organisational changes. This responsibility now rested with the Office of the e-Envoy which would be issuing new guidelines over the next two to three months and would press departments to follow them.³

3. Although, the Office of the e-Envoy has central responsibility for driving forward the electronic government agenda, it cannot require departments to take specific action. The Office could draw non-compliance and the consequences to the attention of the appropriate departmental permanent secretary or chief executive of an agency with the expectation that they would take action. To date, however, the Office had not done so and accepted that it needed to take more assertive action if a call centre was not delivering a service of appropriate quality or represented poor value for money.⁴

Disseminating good practice

4. With over 130 departmental call centres and many more in the private sector there should be considerable scope to share and promote good practice. The Office said that guidance had been disseminated through the network of e-champions who were responsible for promoting electronic government in each department. In addition, the Department of Trade and Industry sponsored the guidance issued by the Call Centres Association, and COI Communications provided support particularly in advising departments on outsourcing their call centres and in occasionally running seminars for civil servants who wanted to know about call centres and how to set them up. More needed to be done, however, to disseminate good practice.⁵

2 C&AG's Report, para 1.5

3 Qq 16, 59, 62

4 Qq 60–64, 88

5 Qq 17–18

Location of call centres

5. Departmental call centres are dispersed throughout the UK (**Figure 1**). There is a high proportion in the South East of England, but in terms of the volume of calls the distribution is more even across the country. None are based overseas. The Office had not specifically sought to encourage call centres to be based away from London, but its new guidance would emphasise the importance of giving sufficient consideration to costs as well as the availability of staff with the necessary skills in determining the location of call centres. In some circumstances call centres might need still to be located in London despite the higher costs.⁶

Figure 1: Location of departmental call centres



NOTE

Some call centres are located in more than one place, but operate as one centre for example the Driving Standards Agency Information and Booking Service is based on sites in both Newcastle and Cardiff and both locations are shown above

Source: NAO analysis of survey responses

Promoting public awareness of the services which call centres provide

6. The public need to know what services they can access using the telephone and how to get in touch with them. Information on where to call is, however, not easily accessible. Departments advertise their services in a number of ways such as in leaflets and on the internet. But only 14% of call centres advertise in telephone directories and there is no single directory of helplines and call centres available. The Office of the e-Envoy said that all call centres should be included in telephone directories as this was the most likely source the public would consult. The only exception might be where a call centre was set up quickly for a short period in response to an emergency or to handle a particular problem such as the foot and mouth crisis.⁷

7 C&AG's Report, para 2.5; Qq 14, 130–132

2 Ensuring that call centres deliver services which meet people's needs

7. The public may contact call centres for a range of services and the type of calls varies from those simply requiring information to those requiring specialist advice or help. Examples include the Tax Credit Helpline, NHS Direct, Floodline and the UK Passport Service Adviceline. Whether callers receive a good standard of service will depend on many factors including whether calls are answered promptly and an engaged tone is not received; operators are courteous and sensitive to the needs of callers; and whether the advice or information provided is accurate and complete. People are likely to be dissatisfied if they are faced with a large number of electronic options before they can speak to someone in person, or are passed to various operators having to repeat the same information several times before their enquiry is resolved.⁸

8. In assessing whether call centres deliver services which meet people's needs we considered how quality of service was monitored; the performance of call centres in answering calls promptly focusing in particular on the Child Benefit Centre; the cost effectiveness of services provided; outsourcing of call centres; and employment conditions.

Quality of service

9. The extent to which call centres monitor quality of service varies. The Child Benefit Centre call centre undertakes an annual survey of customer satisfaction while the Passport Agency has a monthly survey. More frequent information should enable a call centre to improve its services quickly where quality is deficient in some way. Timely customer feedback is particularly important where a call centre is outsourced such as with the UK Passport Service Adviceline and the Environment Agency's Floodline Service because there is a need to ensure that suppliers meet quality requirements specified in their contracts. Asked why only 56 of 133 call centres monitor customer satisfaction the Office of the e-Envoy said that all centres should be doing so as specified in its guidance. Very few call centres assessed, for example through listening to or taping calls, whether the information provided was accurate and complete.⁹

10. The Child Benefit Centre Enquiry Line answers queries about the benefit and requests for changes following an initial claim.¹⁰ Team leaders at the Child Benefit Centre check a minimum of 40 calls per agent per year by listening to their handling of calls to assess their performance and provide feedback. The Department for Work and Pensions said that this level of checking was influenced by the Centre's performance in meeting its accuracy target for processing Child Benefit claims, the reported accuracy for processing these initial claims is 98% and the Department considered that checking 40 calls per agent per year was therefore sufficient. The checks were carried out by trained child benefit experts.¹¹

8 C&AG's Report, paras 2.4, 2.11; Qq 32–33

9 Qq 1, 11–13, 58

10 C&AG's Report, para 3.2

11 *ibid*, paras 3.2, 3.13; Qq 64–65, 70–72

11. Callers can become dissatisfied if they are passed to another operator and have to repeat information they have already given. For example, the UK Passport Service Adviceline may have to transfer an enquiry to a Regional Office if it cannot be resolved. Asked how it minimised the potential inconvenience, the Passport Agency said that it was seeking to reduce the 15% of calls transferred to 5%. The Agency also had a project underway investigating the possibility of simultaneously transferring of data with each voice call. Similarly, someone telephoning the Driving Standards Agency Information and Booking Services is faced initially with six electronic options to direct calls to different groups of staff. The Agency said that by directing callers to different areas their enquiry could be handled more quickly by an operator who was more likely to understand their needs thus improving the quality of the service.¹²

Answering calls promptly

12. The pattern and volume of calls can vary considerably depending on the time of day and also the season. Having too few staff can mean that a call centre cannot handle calls quickly enough, but staffing to handle the maximum likely number of calls can result in spare capacity and unnecessary costs. Call centres deal with variable patterns of calls in different ways including staff working overtime, employing temporary staff and using automated message systems to provide a recorded message which informs callers how long they may have to wait.¹³

13. In 2001–02 the Child Benefit Centre answered 2.6 million calls but a further 5.4 million calls received an engaged tone, and the Centre did not know how many times these callers had to redial and whether they eventually got through to an agent. 80% of the 241 agents taking calls in the Centre work flexi-time and set their own start and finish times. This made it difficult for the Centre to match the number of staff working to the incidence and volume of calls (**Figure 2**).¹⁴

14. The Department for Work and Pensions said that there were a number of reasons why the Child Benefit Centre could not handle the volume of calls it received. Firstly, staff had to undergo 12 weeks of training to be able to give the kind of advice which people telephoning the Child Benefit Centre require. Only 4% of calls were simply requesting information about claims, with the majority of calls requiring operators to understand child benefit entitlement rules. The length of training required prevented more work from being outsourced which would provide greater staff flexibility. Secondly, the Child Benefit Centre was one of the first call centres to be set up, so its information technology was fairly old and not now sufficiently advanced to handle the volume and pattern of calls. Because Child Benefit was relatively simple and not prone to high levels of fraud and inaccuracy it had not been a high priority for investment in IT. It had therefore been difficult to monitor and predict the volume and incidence of calls. The Department told us that the Centre would be introducing sophisticated workflow management technology in the near future.¹⁵

12 Qq 116–119; Ev 26

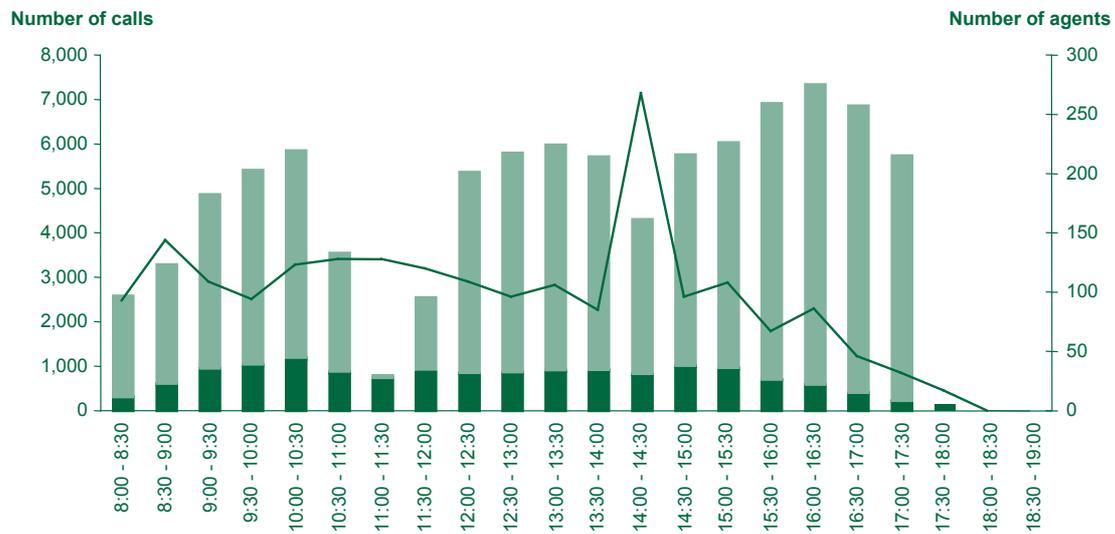
13 C&AG's Report, paras 2.18, 2.20

14 *ibid*, paras 3.10–3.11

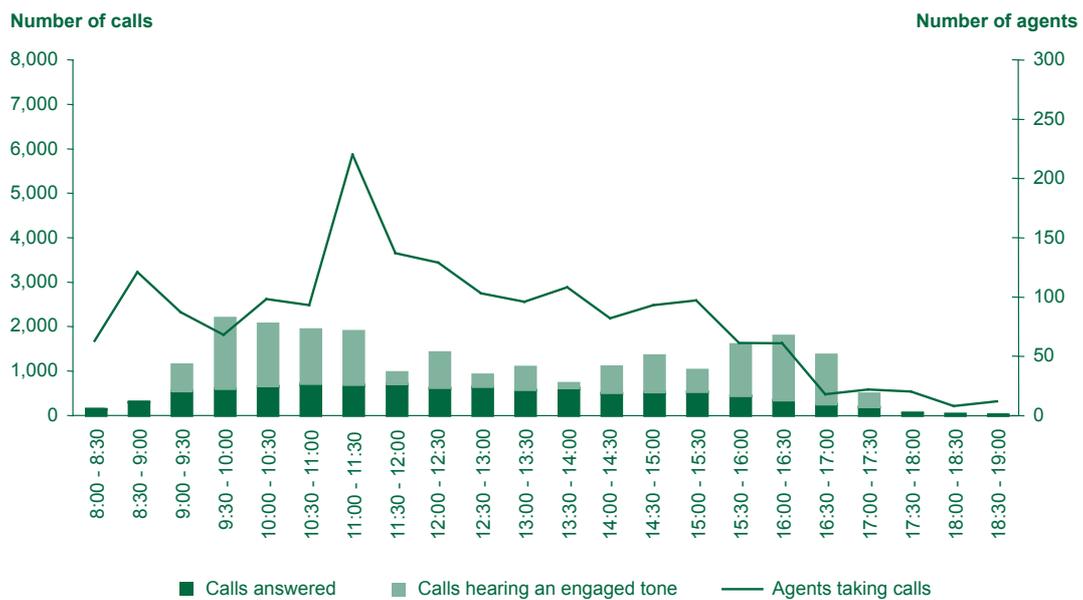
15 Qq 7, 48, 73, 156

Figure 2: In 2001–02 the Child Benefit Centre could not handle all the calls received, particularly during peaks in morning and late afternoon

Monday 3 September 2001 - large number of calls



Thursday 6 December 2001 - low number of calls



NOTES

- On 3 September 79,600 calls received engaged tones and the Centre agents answered 14,000. On 6 December 13,800 calls received engaged tones and the Centre agents answered 8,900. Some customers may redial many times. On 3 September 7,300 callers received engaged tones, and on 6 December 760 callers received engaged tones.
- Between 11:00 and 12:00 on 3 September a fault prevented callers hearing an engaged tone for around half an hour in total - all callers were routed to the queue.

15. The main constraint which prevented the Child Benefit Centre from being able to answer all the calls it received was the high proportion of staff working flexitime, because staff were originally recruited by the Child Benefit Centre where working flexible hours did not present operational difficulties. Staff had subsequently been redeployed to the call centre and with low turnover it had proved difficult to change their terms of employment. In contrast the Driving Standards Agency Information and Booking Service, Floodline and the UK Passport Service Adviceline had either very few staff working flexitime or had outsourced their services.¹⁶

16. Asked whether the call centre was running an unnecessarily complicated operation, and in particular whether all staff taking calls needed 12 weeks of training, the Department said that like many social security issues which might appear simple Child Benefit was often more complex. For example, the growth in claims for children born overseas increased the complexity of work and operators might have to explain other complicating factors such as the application of home responsibilities protection, which could affect a person's pension. In order to handle such complexity callers could be presented with a number of options so that their enquiry could be routed to more or less experienced staff as appropriate. To make the service simple to use the Department had limited callers to two choices on first getting through to the centre, with subsequently a small number of further choices. It had deliberately avoided callers having to choose from a large number of options. In addition, the call centre's IT systems did not equip it to handle some of the complexity of the process.¹⁷

17. The performance of the Passport Agency had improved since our previous report, which was critical of the long delays in issuing passports in the summer of 1999. Outsourcing the service had been a significant contributory factor. 99% of calls were answered and around 90% were connected in 20 seconds. This was because a number of services were provided from one call centre site, so that the private sector provider had more flexibility to redeploy staff to meet peaks and troughs in calls. The Passport Agency said that it did not have this flexibility when the service was provided in-house.¹⁸

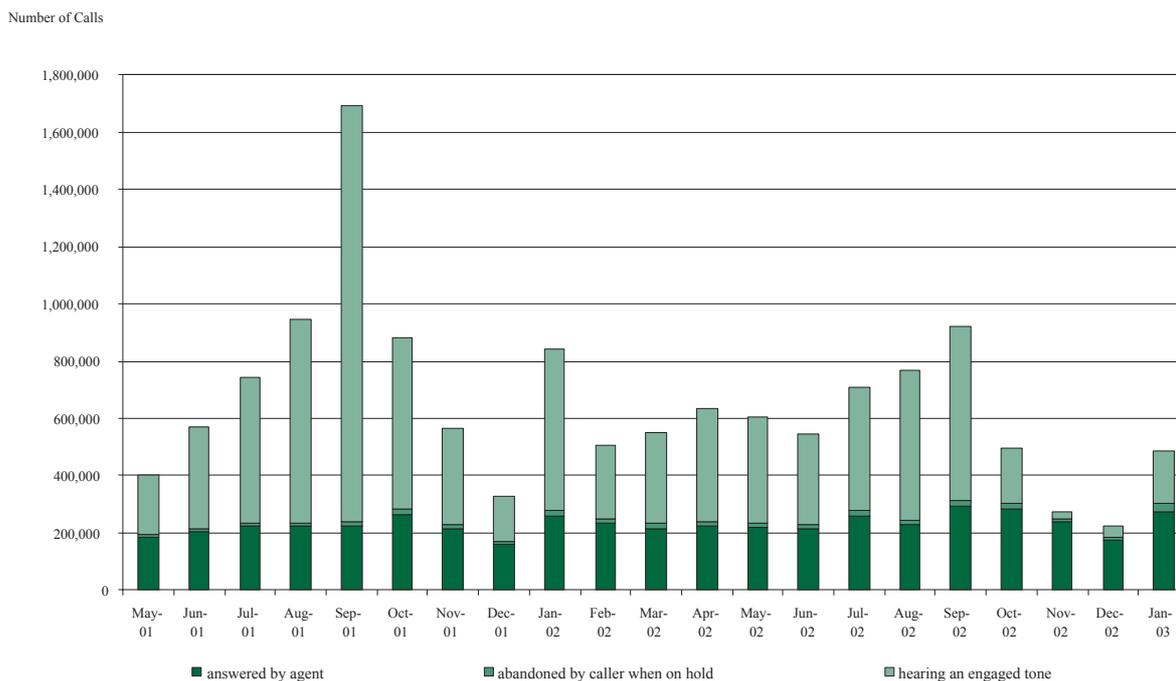
18. Following the Comptroller and Auditor General's examination, the Department for Work and Pensions told us that it had changed the way it deployed and retrained staff in the Child Benefit Call Centre and no longer operated the threshold that once a certain number of callers in a queue was reached they automatically heard an engaged tone. As a result the number of callers receiving an engaged tone had reduced from 600,000 in September 2002 to 200,000 October and 24,000 in November, although it increased to 42,000 in December (**Figure 3**).¹⁹

16 Qq 34–36

17 Qq 8, 46, 48, 73

18 24th Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *The Passport Delays of Summer 1999* (HC 208, Session 1999–00); Qq 4–6

19 Q 78

Figure 3: Proportion of calls to Child Benefit Centre hearing an engaged tone

Source: Department for Work and Pensions

Ensuring that call centres are cost effective

19. Department should be able to identify the costs of their call centres in order to assess the costs effectiveness of their operations. The Comptroller and Auditor General's examination found that 24 (18%) of call centres could not provide any information on their costs. This was because costs were part of a larger outsourced service and could not be easily disaggregated, or departments' financial systems were set up so that costs of call centres were amalgamated with costs for other parts of the department and could not be separately identified. For the 73 call centres which measured both their costs and the average length of calls 44 had a cost per call minute²⁰ of less than £1; 26 a cost of between £1-£5; and three had a cost per call minute of more than £5. The comparable figure for the call centre industry as a whole ranges from 40 pence to 60 pence per call minute.²¹

20. Some centres had high costs per call minute, such as Equality Direct at £27.50, and the Electronic Integrated Arable Compensation Scheme Help Desk with a cost per call minute of £23.00, significantly above the industrial average. The Office of the e-Envoy considered that this could be explained by how long the call centre had been operational. Costs could initially be high until the volume of calls increased. Also for complex calls requiring a detailed response the duration of the call might be much longer, which would increase the cost per call minute. The Office said that cost per call minute was a crude measure which needed to be examined in some detail to obtain a more accurate indication of cost effectiveness.²²

20 Cost per call minute is the cost incurred in handling each minute of a call

21 C&AG's Report, paras 8, 2.6-2.7

22 *ibid*, C&AG's Report, para 2.7 (Figure 16); Qq 28-31, 140-141

21. The Driving Standards Agency established its call centre in 1998, but had not assessed its performance against its original business case justifying the investment. The decision to set up a call centre was part of a much larger business case and it was not possible to identify costs separately. The Agency as a trading fund had a five year agreement with the Treasury not to increase its prices by more than inflation, which it had achieved. The Agency considered that this demonstrated the cost effectiveness of using a call centre to deliver some of its services.²³

Outsourcing call centres to the private sector

22. The majority of call centres are provided in-house by departments, but 45 are contracted to the private sector to manage. Departments have responsibility for deciding whether to outsource their call centres and in reaching a decision can draw on guidance from COI Communications. The Office of the e-Envoy told us that the decision to outsource was usually influenced by whether the private sector could deliver a good quality service more cost effectively. But equally important was the nature of the service and how time critical it was for example, in an emergency situation the public would most likely want information quickly and outsourcing might not be an option. This was because of the length of time it could take to select and appoint a private sector supplier and for the successful firm to acquire sufficient depth of knowledge of the service.²⁴

23. Asked how it had decided to outsource the information and booking service for the driving theory test but retain the booking service for the practical test in-house, the Driving Standards Agency said that the latter involved allocating driving test examiners. If these were not deployed effectively practical driving tests could not take place or could be delayed, which would seriously affect the quality of service to the public. The Agency considered this risk was best managed in-house. For the theory test the external supplier was responsible for the whole process including administering the sitting of the theory test.²⁵

24. Over the Christmas and New Year period, when there was a serious risk of flooding, the company which operated Floodline only answered 82% of calls in 15 seconds compared to the 90% target which the Environment Agency contractually required it to meet. The Agency said it would be discussing this underperformance with the company and how it should be reflected in its payment for this period.²⁶

Working conditions

25. The high volumes of calls, the often repetitive and routine nature of calls, and the fact that large numbers of staff are usually housed in one building looking at computer screens all increase the risk of poor working conditions. The Office of the e-Envoy said that Health and Safety Regulations applied to private sector suppliers contracted to run departments' call centres. In selecting private firms to manage a call centre departments would seek assurance about the working conditions which the potential supplier would provide. The

23 C&AG's Report, para 4.4; Q 155

24 C&AG's Report, para 2.2; Qq 44–45, 103–104

25 Q 154

26 Q 66

Health and Safety Executive had a programme of checking that working conditions were satisfactory for all organisations including call centres. The extent to which departments monitored their suppliers' working conditions was for them to decide.²⁷ Both the Passport Agency and the Environment Agency told us that the location of their outsourced call centres had to be agreed with them, and there was no risk of the contractor deciding to base them overseas.²⁸

27 Qq 144–149

28 Qq 147–159

Conclusions and recommendations

The Office of the e-Envoy

1. As anticipated in its guidelines issued in May 2000 the Office of the e-Envoy should commission reviews of departments' use of call centres and their compliance with the guidance on delivering better public services.
2. To make it easier for the public to be aware of the services which call centres provide and whom to contact, call centre details should be routinely published in telephone directories and made available through directory enquiries services.

Ensuring that call centres deliver services which meet people's needs

3. All call centres should monitor the quality of service which they provide to their customers through a range of indicators including independent surveys, mystery shopping, listening to a sample of calls to assess how well they are handled as well as providing a widely advertised process by which customers can complain if they are not satisfied with the service they receive.
4. The Passport Agency and the Environment Agency have systems in place to provide the capacity and flexibility to deal with fluctuations in the volume of calls they receive. Similarly, the Driving Standards Agency has staffing arrangements that allow it to cope with fluctuating levels of calls. This is in contrast, however, to the Child Benefit Centre where, although the number of callers who receive an engaged tone has reduced from a peak of nearly 1.5 million in September 2001, there still remain some 45,000 who do not get connected immediately. This has much to do with staffing arrangements that poorly reflect the actual pattern of calls received. The Centre therefore needs to identify further ways of ensuring that it has enough staff working at the right time to handle the expected volume of calls.
5. Cost per call minute is only a broad measure of call centre cost effectiveness, though it can indicate areas of performance which require investigation. Departments also need to monitor a number of other indicators such as the number of calls answered within specified times, the length of time callers spend on hold, the number who hear an engaged tone, the quality of the information provided, the fluctuation in the number of calls and the total cost of responding to calls. Such information will help them to identify early enough when call centre resources may not be providing value for money so that remedial action can be taken.
6. Using a call centre to handle calls for a number of different services, as is done by some private sector call centre companies, can provide greater flexibility to improve the handling of calls. In deciding to establish a call centre departments need to consider whether in-house or outsourced provision will best meet the requirements for the services they wish to provide.

7. When call centres are outsourced departments should agree and approve the contractor's working conditions and regularly seek assurance that they remain of an appropriate standard.

Formal minutes

Monday 12 May 2003

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Ian Davidson

Mr Frank Field

Mr Nick Gibb

Mr George Osborne

Mr David Rendel

Mr Gerry Steinberg

Jon Trickett

Mr Alan Williams

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Better public services through call centres), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 25 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Twentieth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 14 May at 3.30 pm]

Witnesses

Monday 27 January 2003

Page

The Baroness Young of Old Scone, Environment Agency, **Mr Andrew Pinder**, Office of the e-Envoy, **Ms Ursula Brennan**, Department for Work and Pensions, **Mr Gary Austin**, Driving Standards Agency, and **Mr Bernard Herdan**, UK Passport Service, Passport and Records Agency

Ev 1

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Third Report	Tobacco Smuggling	HC 143 (<i>Cm 5770</i>)
Fourth Report	Private Finance Initiative: redevelopment of MOD Main Building	HC 298 (<i>Cm 5789</i>)
Fifth Report	The 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease	HC 487 (<i>Cm 5801</i>)
Sixth Report	Ministry of Defence: Exercise Saif Sareea II	HC 502 (<i>Cm 5801</i>)
Seventh Report	Excess Votes 2001–02	HC 503 N/A
Eighth Report	Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) 2001–02	HC 504 N/A
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The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number