

Select Committee No 1

Final Draft Report

of

'Effective Enquiry Handling'

Chair
Councillor J Birch

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1** Wigan Council recognises that developing and maintaining effective enquiry handling requires constant learning by all services to ensure that public services provide good value for the public money invested. The Council is seeking to improve delivery of services and keep pace with rising public expectations.
- 1.2** There is currently no central facility that deals with all public enquiries. However, there are pockets of good practice within the Council. Some departments have their own call centre provision, for example, Environmental Services deal with calls/queries about refuse collection and street lighting, highway conditions, pest control, etc.
- 1.3** Leigh library has been taking out of hours calls for a number of services for some time. In January 2006, they began to deal with out of hours enquiries and manage the Council's switchboard from 5.00 pm - 7.00 pm Monday to Friday and 9.00 am - 2.00 pm on Saturdays. However, not all services use this provision for various reasons.
- 1.4** Wigan and Leigh Housing have their own call centre based in Leigh. Their call centre was set up in a phased approach. In July 2004, repairs for Leigh homes were taken and, from November 2004, this was extended to include repairs for Wigan. Since May 2006, all enquiries have been dealt with via the call centre.
- 1.5** The review involved a consultation exercise to get the public's views on receiving services from Council departments, information collated from a survey from each department and an analysis of what neighbouring authorities have in place to assess how they provided services to the public.

2. Background

2.1 Effective enquiry handling was selected as a topic for review due to concerns about how members of the public received support and advice from the Council and whether their enquiries were dealt with in an efficient manner.

2.2 The aim of the review is to establish what it is like for a member of the public when they first make contact with the Council. Enquiries are received in different ways, for example:

- face to face
- letters
- telephone calls
- e-mail

The challenge is to improve access to the Council services through the use of new technology and better ways of working, dealing with the complete range of services from the Council and its partners. Our aim is to become a centre of excellence for customer service by putting the customer needs first and ensuring the customers are left feeling satisfied with the service they receive.

2.3 This report assesses how effective Wigan Council is in dealing with public enquiries and looks at preferred ways of how members of the public access our services.

2.4 The notion of call centres evokes a variety of views and, whilst some call centres can be seen as problematic in some service industries, Wigan Council's aim is to improve the efficiency of all services that are provided to the public. The Council intends to achieve these improvements via a joint service centre, a major element of which will be generic staff.

2.5 Whilst the report concentrates on call centre operations, a successful provision of such services will also indicate that it is possible for generic enquiry handling staff to effectively cover the majority of service related enquiries the public raise by any contact route.

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3. Aims and Objectives

3.1 To understand the issues of effective enquiry handling in the Borough and investigate what is suitable for Wigan, three aims and objectives of enquiry handling review were agreed as follows:

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1. to determine the effectiveness of a call centre process;
2. to compare the process in Wigan with best practice; and
3. to evaluate the outcomes of a call centre.

3.2 The Terms of Reference for the Review were to examine the following objectives in more detail:

To determine the effectiveness of a call centre process by:

- evaluating capacity of current system/process - what is currently available?
- identifying the demand of services outside normal working hours - what is current demand?
- evaluating the needs of a call answering service or personal assistance service;
- evaluating cost effectiveness of call centres - what are the costs/benefits?

To compare the process in Wigan with best practice by:

- identifying areas of best practice - what works and what doesn't work?
- identifying and consulting with other local authorities and the private sector - what facilities are available in other local authorities and what is available within the private sector?

To evaluate the potential outcomes of a call centre by:

- consulting and interviewing service users and providers - what do departments provide and what are the views of front line staff?
- identifying levels of customer satisfaction and complaints;
- identifying associated cost and benefits;
- identifying training needs and associated costs - what training is available and how much does this cost?

Anticipated Outcomes of the Review

The anticipated outcomes of the review are as follows:

- establish and understand what the position and issues are in Wigan;
- identify how the Council deals with enquiries;
- identify how Council services can work together, and
- identify appropriate methods of consultation to promote the Joint Service Centre.

Methodology

1. In preparation for the review of effective enquiry handling and, in particular, to establish what is most effective for Wigan, the Select Committee collated evidence from various sources, with the aim of improving services provided to members of the public. Collation of data seeks to give a detailed portrait of how effective Wigan is in improving customer satisfaction.

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4.2 In order to fulfil the aims and objectives of the review, a series of tasks, visits and consultation processes were identified, which are detailed below:

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- Survey neighbouring local authorities;
- Obtain trend data;
- Visit a local authority call centre;
- Conduct a focus group with front line staff;
- Arrange for members to visit Council departments;
- Establish training needs and associated costs; and
- Undertaking a literature search and document best practice.

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Further details of the methodology are outlined in Appendix A of this report.

It is envisaged that the outcome of this review will be recommendations that help to free up time for Council departments to deal with more complex enquiry calls and ensures that all to the Council are dealt with promptly. A further outcome will be to improve the services to the customers at their first port of call.

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Key Findings

5.1 Current systems operating in Wigan Council

Street care Helpline receive calls about refuse collection, street lighting, removal of unwanted items, etc.

5.1.1 Environmental Services - have developed a call centre, i.e: Streetcare Helpline

The number of calls and customer satisfaction rates are shown below:

Month	Calls Taken	Total incoming communications*	Customer Satisfaction
April	8,619	9,228	100%
May	9,223	9,796	100%
June	8,842	9,435	98%
July	7,879	8,505	100%
August	8,169	8,656	100%
September	7,935	8,386	100%
October	7,728	8,183	100%
November	7,996	8,403	100%

Total incoming communications include online forms, e-mails, permits for waste recycling centres and highway maintenance forms.

Planned developments in the capacity of the "Streetcare Helpline" include:

- the ability to handle an increased number of incoming calls (i.e. anti-social behaviour, gullies (street grids) and animal warden services)
- the capacity to handle pest control, development control and building control enquiries in the near future.

There are pockets of good practice throughout the Council which follow the Council's core standards for call centres. These are outlined in Appendix B of this report. The following illustrates what provision Wigan currently has in place.

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5.1.2 Wigan Leisure and Culture Trust (WLCT)

There are a number of services that transfer incoming calls through to WLCT out of hours service, they are Chief Executives, i.e. Democratic Services, Registrars, Public Relations, Mayoral Services, Street Care Helpline, various elements of Community Protection and Revenues and Benefits. *(The calls taken out of hours is an experimental and pilot scheme only).*

Mystery Shopping Exercise was completed on the out of hours telephone service provided by Leigh library. This exercise was carried out so that we could identify both the successes and any areas for improvement with the service.

Details of the telephone call queries that the library employees may be expected to answer were obtained from the manager of Leigh library in the form of:

- a prompt sheet compiled by various departments, which had been updated since the June mystery shopping
- a list of questions which are frequently asked during the out of hours service

A total of fourteen queries were carried out via telephone, testing the following six section areas:

Chief Executives:	Democratic Services
Chief Executives:	Registrars
Chief Executives:	Mayoral Services
Engineers:	Street Care Helpline (including street lighting)
Community Protection:	Various
Finance & IT:	Revenues and Benefits

Overall results are summarised below with further breakdowns from the test results.

	June 2006	November 2006
Number of enquiries attempted	10	14
Number of calls answered	4	14
% of total calls answered	40%	100%
Average number of times called before call got through	2.5	1
% calls answered within ten rings	100%	100%
% calls answered with good evening/good morning in the greeting	75%	79%
% calls answered with their name in the greeting	0%	0%
% calls with department given in the greeting	0%	0%
% calls where information given was correct in full	25%	79%
% calls where information given was correct in part	75%	14%
% either very/fairly satisfied with time taken to deal with enquiry	75%	92%
% either very/fairly satisfied with information given	25%	100%
% either very/fairly satisfied with competency of staff	25%	79%
% either very/fairly satisfied with helpfulness of staff	100%	100%
% either very/fairly satisfied with final outcome	100%	79%

Outcomes from November 2006 mystery shopping exercise show:

- Total number of calls being answered first time (and within first ring)
- Giving correct information either in full or in part
- Helpfulness of staff

Possible areas for improvement:

- Final outcome
- Competency of staff

Although we have done some comparisons between the June and November mystery shopping exercises, it proved difficult to do this fully as we were able to test much more information in November. The key points from the comparisons are:

- Staff scored higher in November on almost all services we tested.
- 75% of information which was provided was correct in full in November, compared to only 25% in June.
- 92% of mystery shoppers were very/fairly satisfied with the time it took to deal with their enquiry in November, compared to 75% in June.
- 100% of mystery shoppers were satisfied with the information they were given in the calls in November, compared to only 25% being satisfied in June.
- 79% of mystery shoppers were satisfied with the final outcome from the calls in November, compared to 100% in June (however, as stated previously, only four calls were tested in June, compared with all fourteen calls in November).

5.1.3 Wigan and Leigh Housing

Wigan and Leigh Housing set up a call centre using a phased approach. In July 2004, they dealt with repairs from Leigh homes and, subsequently, extended the provision in November 2004 for repairs for Wigan homes. In December 2004, this extended to take on housing management calls and a further tranche in July 2005. By May 2006, all enquiries previously dealt with through area offices are now dealt with by Contact Centre. In the initial set up back in July 2004, they employed six contact centre advisers, one manager and a technical adviser from Leigh Building Services. To date, they employ twenty-three contact advisers and four other staff.

They have developed a range of initiatives to ensure that they continuously improve the services they provide. They do this by:

- targeting resources;
- using flexible staff contracts;
- training and developing staff;
- use of technology; and
- supervision

Customer satisfaction rates of 4,310 residents surveyed show a 98% satisfaction rate with the services they provide. Customer satisfaction rates from July to November 06 were:

- July 96% Satisfied
- August 99% Satisfied
- September 98% Satisfied
- October 99% Satisfied
- November 98% Satisfied

5.1.4 Legal and Property Services - The major source of questions from members of the public is parking services.

Over a 12 week period in 2006, parking staff took 2,540 counter enquiries from members of the public. There was an average per day of 42 visits. This figure

increases when it is permit renewal time to an average of 55. There are currently three permit renewal periods each year, in April, June and October.

Over a 12 week period, they received 3,310 telephone calls within normal working office hours (9.00 am to 5.00 pm), at an average of 55 calls each day.

Parking services already operate an out of hours line. At 5.00 pm their dedicated number is transferred to the call centre in Leigh. That centre has dealt with 45 enquiries over a 12 week period. Parking services also offer other forms of communication such as internet and e-mail which have received 73 queries over the same 12 week period.

Overall, the Council provides a variety of communication methods to the general public. However, there are plans in place to have a joint service centre in place by 2010 with a phased approach resulting in the services for Streetcare Helpline, Planning and Community Protection enquiries being joined up into one service centre by December 2007.

5.1.5 Children and Young People's Services

CYPS received enquiries about school places, student loans, Connexions Service etc. An example of calls about the Connexions Service is illustrated below:

Since 1st April 2006, Connexions service have been part of CYPS. There are two offices located in Wigan and Leigh that provide services directly for young people. The services are provided by direct access. Young people can either drop in to one of the offices or arrange a pre-booked appointment. The number of face to face enquiries for 2006 are shown in the table below:

Centre	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Wigan	715	571	621	467	555	747	812	926	778	632	681	401
Leigh	560	524	540	576	634	825	680	823	680	581	645	403

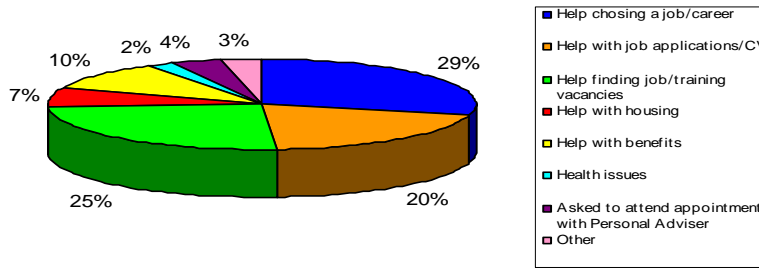
The above figures include some enquiries about Youth Service. The number of staff employed to deal with all enquiries equate to two full time equivalent.

The opening hours of Wigan and Leigh offices are:

- Monday 9.00 am - 5.00 pm
- Tuesday 9.00 am - 5.00 pm
- Wednesday 9.00 am - 4.00 pm
- Thursday 9.00 am - 5.00 pm
- Friday 9.00 am - 5.00 pm

During a ten day period in March 2006, a survey was conducted by asking young people who visited either of the offices to complete a questionnaire. In total 62 young people completed the questionnaire. The results are shown below:

Why have you visited the Connexions Centre?



When compared with December 2004, “Help with job applications/CV “increased from 9% to 20% whilst “Help choosing a job/career”, although still the main reason for visiting the office, fell from 38% in December 2004 to 29% in 2006. A possible explanation was the time of the year, with more clients already knowing what job/career they want at this point in the Year. This would also explain the increase in requests for help with applications and CV’s from 9% (December 2004) to 20% (March 2006). For all other help with housing, health issues and benefits, the percentages were identical in both surveys.

A simple but important question asked “*Did you get the help you needed from the interview?*” When asked in 2004, 97% agreed that they did. This very positive response was improved upon this time with 100% of respondents saying that they got the help they needed.

In conclusion, the survey has again produced very positive feedback that shows Connexions is meeting the expectations of young people. They find Community Personal Advisers to be very helpful, knowledgeable and able to provide them with the help they need. They are also satisfied with the range of opportunities (employment and training) that are on offer.

5.1.7 Adult Services

**Central Duty Team
January 2006 to December 2006**

Out of Hours Provision

Extended Hours Service
From 5.00 pm to 8.00 pm Monday to Friday and 8.45 am to 1.00 pm on Saturday.

The service is covered by a Social Worker and a Central Duty Officer on a rota basis who deal with calls during these periods to an outcome which should be any of the following:

NFA (no further action)
Passed to an out of hours social worker for further action
Passed to another agency
Pass to specialist team for assessment
Linked to ongoing referral

Out of Hours Social Worker

From 5.00 pm to 8.45 am every night.

From 8.45 am to 5.00 pm Saturday and Sunday.

These periods are covered by one EOOHSW (who is approved under the Mental Health Act 1983). They deal with all emergency referrals for CYPS, DAS, Mental Health and Housing (if relevant and no hostel places, then passed to Out of Hours Housing Officer). They are supported between 8.45 am and 5.00 pm on Saturday and Sunday by a CYPS worker.

They receive their contacts once CDT is closed and at Bank Holiday periods via Firstcall.

The main role of the emergency out of hours social worker to deal with emergency contacts as they arise to an outcome where they are safe to be left until the next working day, when they can be passed to the team the service user is open to, or, in the case of a new contact, to the appropriate specialist team.

Annual Activity Levels - 01 January 2006 to 31 December 2006

Total number of contacts recorded at Central Duty Team = 17,575

The Central Duty Team receives on average 4,400 incoming calls per month prior to the split with CYPS. In the nine months since, the average is 3,000.

The EOOHSW service receives between 300 and 450 calls/pages per month.

Adults

- o Total Adult Contacts - 12,182
- o Contacts open to Adult Teams - 1,740
- o Domestic Violence finished at CDT - 6,079
- o No Further Action by CDT - 954
- o Redirected to Other Service/Agency by CDT - 172
- o Contact Progress to Referral/Assessment by CDT SW - 3,237
- o NFA Referral/Assessment by CDT SW - 725 (22%)
- o Progress to Specialist Assessment by CDT - 2,502 (78%)

CYPS

- o Total Children and Young People's Contacts - 5,393
- o Contacts open to CYPS Teams (including 1,390 DVs) - 2,690
- o No Further Action by CDT - 683
- o Progress to CIN DUTY for 24 hour decision - 2,021

Method of Contacts taken by Central Duty Team

	Number	Percentage
E-mail	75	0.43
Fax	9,666	54.99
In person	29	0.16
Letter/Form	582	3.31
Telephone	7,233	41.10
Total	17,575	100.00

Time Bands of Contacts Recorded

	Number	Percentage
Monday to Friday, 0845 to 1700	13,118	74.59
Monday to Friday (Extended Hours) 1700 to 2000	1,920	10.92
Monday to Friday (EOOHSW) 2000 to 0845	1,048	5.96
Saturday (Extended Hours) 0845 to 1300	603	3.43
Saturday to Monday (EOOHSW) 1300 to 0845	894	5.86
Total	17,575	

Reason at First Contact

Absconsion	215	1.22%
Accommodated	9	0.05%
Alleged Abuse	58	0.33%
Assessment under Mental Health Act 1083	122	0.69%
Asylum Seekers	8	0.04%
Carer Assessment	26	0.14%
Child Care Concerns	2,334	13.28%
Community Death	4	0.02%
Community Meals	159	0.90%
Continuing Care	9	0.05%
Domestic Violence	9,203	52.36%
Drug/Substance Misuse	3	0.01%
MARAC	23	0.13%
General Advice	1,298	7.38%
General Assessment	2,186	12.43%
Housing Issues/Out of Hours Housing	409	2.32%
PACE	43	0.24%
Reassessment of Package	1,360	7.73%
Request for Accommodation (CYPS)	62	0.35%
Section 2 Notification	33	0.18%
Cancellation of part or whole package	7	0.03%
Young Carer	13	0.07%
Total	17,575	

From the figures above, you will see that of the 17,575 contacts that are recorded on SWIFT, 4,430 were open cases to either DAS or CYPS. These are usually made up of contacts that come in during extended hours or EOOHSW service that are open cases plus domestic violence information that is received from the police where either the child or adult is an open case.

4,523 were sent to specialist teams for further assessment at both DAS and CYPS.

Of the approximate 3,000 calls per month, only approximately 600 will result in a recorded contact (ways that contacts received listed above).

Of the other approximate 2,400 calls per month will be from other agencies, service users, relatives or others wishing to speak to the social worker undertaking the screening of the contact.

Cases that are open to other teams within DAS, CYPS, mental health, hospitals that are redirected to the appropriate team

Calls from people asking for advice but not wanting to make a referral

Calls from people that are redirected to other agencies.

Outcomes/Satisfaction

Planned improvements during 2007 are:

- to undertake a customer satisfaction survey;
- for referrals received via fax, e-mail, letter or telephone, a social worker would telephone customer to continue with assessment; and
- provide service users with telephone contact number.

However, in 2006 only three complaints were received about the service offered by the Central Duty Team

5.1.8 Community Protection

A summary for the whole of the Community Protection Department was received. The Department currently has on an average daily basis:

- **27** face to face contacts per day;
- receives **114** letters per day;
- receives **621** phone calls per day; and
- receives **137** e-mails per day.

The above figures are based on the current out of town bases. However, we also received from section heads breakdowns of their service on what they predict would be the footfall, if the services were to become town centre based. The table below gives details.

Section	Face to Face	Letters	Phone Calls	E-mail
Anti-social Behaviour Unit	0	3	65	1
Security	16	45	550	80
Food, Health and Safety	25	17	200	150
Public Health	10	15	100	5
Trading Standards	1	1	25	5
Management Services	1	1	10	2
Private Sector Housing	4	20	16	1
Environmental Protection	0	10	80	0
Licensing	17	200	50	10
Community Safety Team	3	20	26	3

Based on the figures given by section heads, we can see that face to face contact would more than double, if based in the JSC. They also predict increases in the number of letters, phone calls and e-mails received.

Type of Enquiries

The number and type of enquiries vary across services with the largest number of enquiries being about refuse collection, street lighting and revenue and benefits. Services that receive the highest number of calls are:

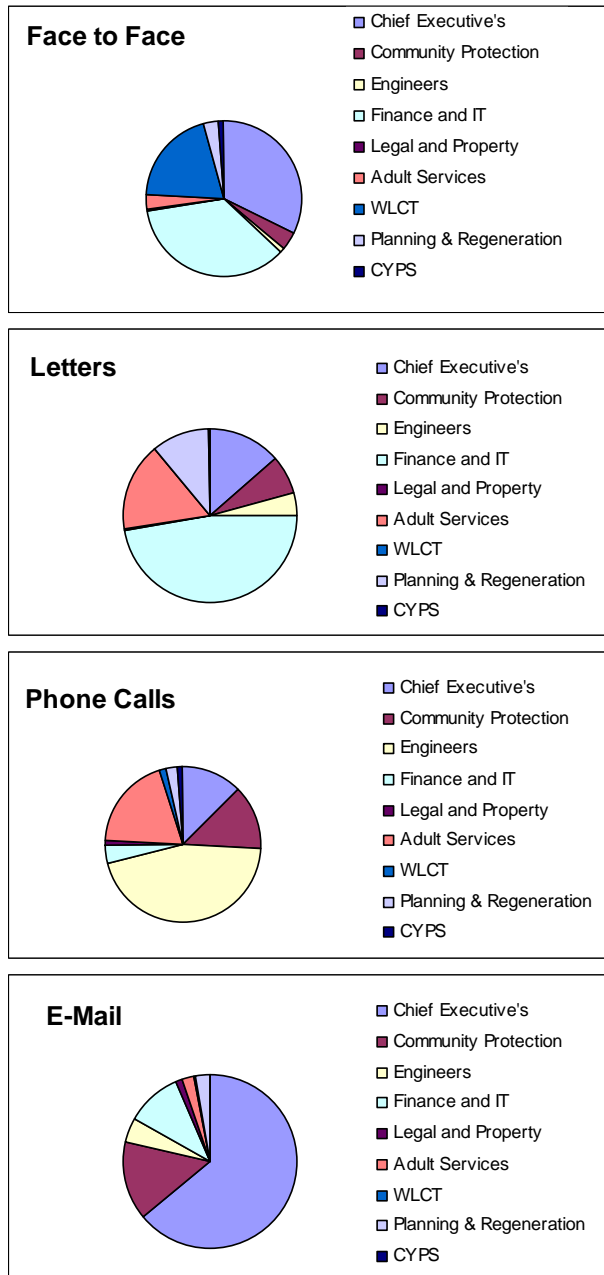
- refuse collection
- street lighting
- revenues and benefits
- Adult Services
- Community Protection

5.2 Current Demand across the Council's services

The Council departments were asked '**what was the average daily number of face to face contacts, letters, phone calls and e-mails**'. The graphs below show the totals for each department that responded overall.

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(Source: *Wigan Council's Business Case - 2004/05*)

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The information shows that overall **17.3 %** of enquiries were made by letter, **21.1%** face to face contact, **10.3 %** via e-mails and **51.3 %** by telephone. The overall total number of enquiries on a daily basis was **9,082** in 2004/05. *(It must be noted that the figures below do not reflect accurate number of contacts. There are a number of re-routed calls which are unknown).*

The information has been broken down by department and their individual sections, where this information is available, as shown below.

Total **daily** numbers equate to:

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Department	Face to face	Letters	Phone calls	E-mail
Chief Executives	614	215	591	600
Community Protection	77	114	621	137
Engineers	15	64	2087	42
Finance and IT	673	743	180	100
Legal % Property	12	4	60	10
Adult Services	58	258	906	21
Wigan Leisure and Cultural Trust	383	0	62	2
Planning and Regeneration	57	170	100	25
Children and Young People's Services	20	5	55	1
Total	1,909	1,573	4,662	938
%	21.1%	17.3%	51.3%	10.3%

Based upon the above figures and taking into account telephone calls only on an annual basis (excluding bank holidays), it is estimated that the Council would require approximately 43 employees to deal with the volume of calls received, based upon the average duration of a call of 180 seconds with a two second delay. These figures are based upon 4,662 calls taken per day (as illustrated above) based upon a seven hour day. The average calls per hour equals 665. There are some calls that are taken by outreach offices, which may not be included within departmental figures.

An example of duration times of calls and average delays, based upon 665 calls taken per hour, is illustrated in the calculations below:

5.3 Staffing: Possible requirements and current provision

5.3.1 Erlang C Calculator Results Table

The figures below are based upon receiving 665 calls per hour, based upon either 120/180 or 240 seconds call duration, with an average delay per call ranging from either two or three seconds. Number of agents required equate to FTEs.

Calls per hour	Call duration (s)	Avg delay (s)	Agents required
665	120	2	30
665	120	3	29
665	180	2	43
665	180	3	42
665	240	2	55
665	240	3	54

(For example, if 665 calls per hour took on average four minutes (240 seconds) and the average delay of taking the calls was three seconds, we would need 54 FTEs to manage the volume of calls).

5.3.2 Current Staffing

The current provision/costs vary according to demand. Environmental Services employ ten staff that equate to 6.25 FTE that currently service a maximum of:

- seven lines on Monday
- six lines on Tuesday
- six lines on Wednesday and Thursday mornings.
- five lines on Wednesday and Thursday Afternoons
- Five lines on Fridays

Staff hours equate to 227 a week.

In addition, there are two full time supervisors.

Leigh Library facility employs four part-time staff and Wigan and Leigh homes employ 25 FTE number of staff.

Wigan and Leigh Homes employ twenty-three contact advisers and four other staff. The opening hours are 8.00 am - 6.00 pm Monday to Friday, 8.00 am to 12 noon on Saturday and there is an out of hours service for emergencies via concierge.

Other Department's staffing levels vary as staff have additional duties, along with answering calls/queries from the public.

Both Children and Young People's Services and Adult Services employ staff who work in the Central Duty Team offices to deal with sensitive/difficult enquiries. For

their services they also use an external partner named “ Health call” who takes calls/queries out of office hours and weekends. This service is vital to ensure that the safety of their clients is dealt with promptly and effectively. Should these services be used by the public, particularly out of office hours, they would contact an officer of the Council who will be on duty to deal with complex issues.

5.4 Provision in other Councils

In 2001 Liverpool City Council improved Public Services by entering into a partnership with BT. This initiative radically improved services for Liverpool residents.

- The jointly owned company is responsible for providing a range of services, but not all Council services, e.g. Human Resources, Benefits, Housing etc;
- The call centre opened in February 2001;
- On average they receive approximately 6,000 calls per day and employ around 250 staff;
- Each service delivered via the call centre undertook a detailed scoping exercise;
- Processes have been developed for ‘back office; process owner identified;
- Identification of service levels and escalation routes;
- Overall the first point of contact has a resolution rate of 92%; and
- Deliver scoping exercise, e.g. flow chart outlining the processes/steps call centre operators would go through when dealing with calls.

Liverpool City Council uses various methods of consultation and has its own marketing team. Examples of consultation methods are:

- questionnaires
- face to face
- exit surveys
- One Stop Shop network
- telephone surveys
- postal surveys
- focus groups and
- outreach sessions

To market their services they initially started with a soft launch as they needed to carefully manage customers expectations but, following a 'bedding in' period of approximately three/six months, publicity included:

- local press
- community newspapers
- City Magazine
- telephone directory
- LCC literature
- letterheads
- forms and
- www.liverpool.gov.uk

BT provided the infrastructure and Liverpool City Council provided Human Resources.

The Select Committee had an opportunity to visit neighbouring authorities who have had a call centre that deals with all services, to find out how effective they are. The case studies below outline the key findings.

5.4.1 Case Study 1

A neighbouring authority began placing a small number of services together to meet the demand of customer enquiries. This began approximately five years ago. They now have a call centre which remains part of the Council but within its own directorate. Over the years, they have increased the number of services they handle and, to date, all eighteen services are located within one call centre. They employ approximately 100 staff who deal with enquiries covering a range of services. On average, each member of staff has received training to deal with five different services.

The breakdown of staff employed to cover services are as follows:

1 Contact Centre Manager, 1 Contact Development Officer, 2 Senior Team Leaders, 7 Team Leaders, 2 External Services Training Officers, 18 Technical Advisers (7 for Revenue and Benefits, 9 Housing and 2 Environmental/ Highways), 73 customer service representatives and 2 Switchboard Operators. On average, they receive approximately one million calls per annum and the total staffing costs, excluding the Contact Centre Manager, equals £1,847,955. As they take calls for all departments, they re-charge each department 46p per minute of each call. The call centre also take all calls/enquiries about Council vacancies, including sending and receiving application forms for all jobs advertised. Another initiative that they introduced is a 'starter pack' for residents who have moved into the borough, which includes information about all Council services, who to contact and the opening hours of services.

5.4.2 Case Study 2

One of the first authorities in the country to set up a one-stop shop producing access to a wide range of information and help with Council services, was in Greater Manchester. However, they are currently phasing in services in one centre such as Environmental Health and Management, job vacancies and Revenues and Benefits. It is anticipated that these services will be in one centre by January 2007, with the remainder of services to join by January 2008. They currently have approximately twenty members of staff and this will increase to thirty-four by January 2007. They consult the public by hosting numerous discussion groups across the Council and will undertake a quarterly customer satisfaction survey with the public.

5.5 Provision in the private sector

Although we gathered evidence from other authorities, the select committee decided to find out what private sector arrangements are in place to deal with large volumes of calls.

A service industry employer provides a call centre operation five days per week, as outlined in case study 3 below:

Case Study 3

A private sector organisation that operates within the UK and Europe provide a call centre facility. The services provided are 24/7, however, they took the decision to manage their call centre on a five day per week, 260 days per annum from 8.00 am till 6.00 pm. Services that are required out of hours were outsourced.

On average, they receive approximately 2,500 - 3,000 calls per hour and employ fifty FTE. Based upon information received, the numbers of calls received during a year are as follows:

2,500 calls per hour based on 10 hours per day, 5 days per week = 6.5 million pa and 3,000 per hour = 7.8 million calls pa.

The company provides their customers with a 24 hour support service.

A decision was taken to outsource their out of hours service and the successful company now provide a service from 18.00 to 09.00, whilst the offices are unmanned and offer backup service during day times.

The Service

The company handles a wide range of calls during this period. Daily reports are sent back to the client illustrating the calls handled and action taken. Calls are taken using the clients business name and are logged directly onto the client's own systems via the internet. All calls are fully traceable.

The result

The customer is delighted with the service. Client personnel do not need to be employed out of office hours and the need to use an answering machine has been avoided.

Some organisations identified in the case studies have been operating call centres for many years and some organisations who we contacted are at earlier stages of the process. A number of organisations, at this moment in time, felt that their circumstances did not warrant creating a unified call centre provision.

5.6 Preferred ways of contacting the Council

Every effort was made to find out what method the public had used when contacting the Council. Below are some examples of the public contacting the Council:

- 51% had contacted the Council by telephone
- 16% called into a Council office in person
- 13% made contact in writing
- 9% used the Council's website
- 6% had contacted the Council by e-mail

When asked about the reason for contacting the Council, 53% were to ask for an item to be removed, e.g. an old fridge, 23% to get further information about a service, 20% was to complain about a service, 20% to pay bill/rent (please note that some people gave more than one reason for contacting the Council). Overall, the preferred way of contacting the Council was as follows:

- 80% via telephone (to speak to someone directly)
- 9% in person at an office
- 4% e-mail
- 2% writing and posting a letter
- 1% using Council's website
- 2% don't know

Source: Citizens' Panel June 2005

5.6.1 The Select Committee have attended a number of Tenants Association Group meetings in the South of the Borough to find out how effective the Council were when dealing with enquiries from members of the public.

When asked about the way they had contacted the Council, the majority had contacted the Council by telephone, one person had used e-mail and a small number had contacted their local Councillor.

Although the majority had contacted the Council by telephone, one person stated that they had been frustrated by being held in a queue and it took approximately twenty minutes before the enquiry was dealt with and one person was asked to leave a message and a manager would return the call. Unfortunately, this took forty-eight hours for the call to be returned. However, the person who used e-mails, stated that after three separate e-mails to the Council with no response, they contacted the Council again by telephone and the enquiry was dealt with promptly.

When asked whether anyone had contacted the Council after 5.00 pm, the overall majority stated they were totally unaware that services could be contacted after 5.00 pm. They stated that you could only contact the Council after 5.00 pm for an emergency only. However, a small number of people who had contacted the Council out of hours stated that they received an excellent service.

When asked about what opening hours the Council should provide for all services, the overall majority stated 8.00 am - 8.00 pm Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings.

They went on to ask the following questions:

- Why can't we get information about all services at the Property Shop in Leigh?
- Why can't the Council provide access to a telephone in the Town Hall buildings, together with an information board about services?
- Why can't stickers be placed on refuse bins prior to periods of service closures to indicate when your next refuse collection will take place? (*A neighbouring authority already provides this service*)

During the meeting, an issue was raised about providing methods of communication for young people, which could be promoted in schools.

Whilst some members of the group had experienced difficulties contacting the Council, some had received a good service, for example, those who had contacted the Finance Department felt that their enquiry was dealt with promptly and efficiently.

Lastly, they did feel that the Council should inform the public about all services i.e. who to contact about all services, together with their opening hours. They felt that the best method of communicating to the general public would be by using the Council's Borough Life magazine.

Overall, they did express some concern that it was frustrating, when contacting the Council, if they had to be passed around from service to service.

5.6.2 People's willingness to use call centres

When asked about using a call centre for all enquiries, they felt that this would be a good idea as long as you weren't put on hold. However, they didn't mind the current system operated by Street Care helpline, as this service told you what number you were held in a queue. Their response was:

"well at least you know on average how long to wait and at least you can put the phone down and try again later and it would be easier to know that when you rang the Council your enquiry could be dealt with, without having to ring different services".

Over seventy per cent of people consulted said they were content to receive advice and services from departments over the telephone. For the remaining thirty per cent, they preferred to deal with someone in person (eight per cent), has either tried telephoning and could not get through or found that the service they had received to be unacceptable or wanted to receive information in writing.

5.7 Quality of Services

The public's perception of quality is often influenced by their experience of the private sector, particularly retail and travel industries. With services provided by the public sector, there is usually only one supplier and, therefore, it is important that reliable measures exist to provide departments with reassurance that whatever communication method is used is effective.

5.8 Training

Training undertaken for call centre staff follows a similar pattern in the public and private sector. This, in part, can be attributed to the NVQ qualification for call centre staff introduced in 2003, which has quickly become a standard within the industry.

This uptake of the NVQ has been helped by the Learning and Skills Council funding for the qualification.

5.8.1 Private Sector

The banking, insurance and most other sectors that have call centres now use the NVQ for call centre staff as a baseline qualification. This teaches the basic customer care skills needed at level 2. Many sectors now train staff to the more advanced level 3 NVQ.

This is achieved by training in specific skills and, as an example, within the banking sector staff, receive specific training in opening and closing customer accounts, transfers between accounts, setting up direct debits, etc.

Staff are also trained so that they know when to either send forms out to customers or to pass them on to second level support. This is for areas where they are not technical experts; the software systems used help in this by providing prompt questions. These areas may be Corporate Finance (customer has rung the wrong number) or Estates (accounts and property etc of those recently deceased).

Teams of staff are trained in specific areas, but have the opportunity annually to apply to work on another team, which will be providing support for different areas.

Whilst this means further training needs to be undertaken and teams managed further. It does provide highly trained staff who can slot in to other teams at busy times and to cover for holidays, sickness, maternity etc.

5.8.2 Public Sector

Most public sector call centres mirror the above with a mix of NVQ and in-house training. The big difference is in the number of services provided by the public sector. Most call centres train each member of staff in a maximum of five areas, for example Benefits, Housing, Refuse collection, reporting of potholes and possibly street light reporting. One Council found that there was a disadvantage to training staff in a number of different service areas that staff turnover was high, due to staff getting higher paid jobs because they had become multi-skilled.

Many services within the public sector are wider than banking or insurance services, so it becomes harder for staff to move areas or teams and still retain a very high level of service. This is further compounded by the amount and frequency of legislation changes in areas such as Benefits. good software systems that are kept up to date can help in this area.

The other issue for the public sector is the myriad of other training expectations around Equality and Diversity, Freedom of Information and Data Protection and a host of other areas staff are expected to be aware of. These are higher than in the private sector and need to be built in to any training action plans. This also in theory makes the cost of training in the public sector higher.

The Council should explore all funding avenues for call centre staff.

Key Issues for the Council if an extension of call centre operations is decided upon:

- Level of skill and knowledge of staff - skills analysis;
- Initial training and qualifications - NVQ - In house etc;
- Staff training to be provided in advance of working in a call centre;
- Ongoing training - customer service, use of system, provision of new service;
- Ensure appropriate salaries for people who are front line face of Council;
- Funding streams - Learning and Skills Council, local college;
- Need for job variety and training;
- Investment in infrastructure, both front and back office;
- Ensure processes/procedures are in place;
- Information technology and databases to enable staff to access information to respond to calls; and
- Independent evaluation of call centre performance and the quality of service delivered to customers.

The centralisation of call management aims to improve an organisation's operations and reduce costs, while providing a standardised, streamlined, uniform service for consumers, making this approach ideal for large organisations with extensive customer support needs. By having a dedicated telephone service for dealing with calls should enable the Council to improve significantly the quality of support and advice it provides to the public.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The key conclusions from this review are as follows: Our overall view is that there is a great deal of good practice within the Council, but there is considerable variability in the way enquiries are handled and processed.
- 6.2 Firstly, there is no central facility that deals with all public enquiries. Although there are pockets of good practice, there is evidence that some services have few or no links at all with one another.
- 6.3 Although customer satisfaction surveys are positive, our research demonstrates that there are some key areas for improvements. For example:
- extend opening hours for access to services from 8.00 am - 8.00 pm Monday - Friday and Saturday mornings;
 - improve the response rate for enquiries received by e-mail;
 - advertise within Borough Life magazine the different ways to contact the Council; and
 - make better use of Council buildings that are accessible to the public by:
 - Access to a telephone
 - Information board display
 - Information about all services and who to contact.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1 Ensure that the public can access services from 8.00 am - 8.00 pm Monday-Friday and Saturday mornings.
- 7.2 Provide better information leaflets for the public about services which they can access in public buildings, i.e.
- access to a telephone
 - Information Board about Council services
 - Libraries
- 7.3 To develop partnership working arrangements to provide information leaflets about Council services for the public, i.e:
- local supermarkets/shopping malls
 - community and voluntary groups
 - GP Surgeries
- 7.4 Develop well trained personnel to provide the highest level of customer care to the public.
- 7.5 To have more flexible staffing arrangements to handle effective service delivery.

What we examined

What we did

Whether public opinion is that we provide effective enquiries about services.

Attend tenant association
Information from residents survey
Customer satisfaction - trend data

How departments provide help lines to the public and the quality of services they provide.

Face to face interviews
Focus group with front line staff
Visit departments

How neighbouring authorities manage enquiries received by the public services.

Visit local authority call centre
Presentation/discussions of findings with neighbouring authorities
Telephone interviews with private sector

Core Standards

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The report to Chief Officers' Management Team "Achieving our vision to customer relationships, access to services and reputation management" contained the improvement plan for the Council's customer relationship management strategy.
- 1.2 This contained a requirement to "Agree and deploy core standards for performance management of all "call centre" type work. Evaluate and monitor compliance".
- 1.3 This document details the core standards that should be adhered to by all "call centres" within the Authority as a result of consultation with these operations.

2. Outline of Core Standards

- 2.1 In line with the Call Centre Association Standards, four key areas should be measured by each call centre. These are:
 - (1) Average time taken to answer a telephone call
 - (2) Number of calls abandoned
 - (3) Customer satisfaction with the service received
 - (4) Average number of calls per hour taken by each operator

3. Requirements of each standard

3.1 Average Time Taken To Answer Telephone Call

- 3.1.1 Average time to answer a telephone call should be calculated as follows;

Average length of wait (over the period monitored) - length of front-end message on call centre system = Average time to answer call.

- 3.1.2 The target in line with the corporate standard for answering telephone calls should be twenty seconds.

3.2 Number of calls abandoned

- 3.2.1 This measure refers to the number of calls that are abandoned/hung up by the caller(s) before connection with an operator.
- 3.2.2 The figure for abandoned calls should be added to total number so calls taken to determine the average lost.
- 3.2.3 The target for all call centres is 8%.

3.3 Average Number of calls taken per hour by operator

3.3.1 This is a measure of the volume of calls handled by each operator within the call centre.

3.3.2 The total number of calls taken per period should be divided by the hours that the call centre was in operation in that period to arrive at the average number of calls that the call centre receives per hour. This should be divided by the average number of lines that were in operation in that period to arrive at the average number per operator.

4. Measure of Customer Satisfaction

4.1 Frequency of consultation

4.1.1 Whilst there is no corporate guidance on the frequency of consultation as a minimum requirement, consultation with service users should be taken at least annually.

4.2 Sample size

4.2.1 The number of calls that a call centre receives is high, compared to other services that the Council provides. To allow for the time and expense of consultation, a minimum sample size of 1% of calls received is recommended.

4.3 Method of consultation used

4.3.1 This can be any chosen medium, e.g. letter, telephone, e-mail, etc.

4.4 Satisfaction levels

4.4.1 The level of customer satisfaction that should be targeted is 85% of customers who respond to the survey are either satisfied or very satisfied with the service.

4.5 Questions used in surveys

4.5.1 Whilst the amount of questions used can vary, the questions on the facing page should be used in all cases when obtaining customer satisfaction performance measures for a call centre.

Action Plan

Key Task	Responsible Organisation	Start Date	End Date	Resources	Success Measures
<p>Ensure that the public can access to services from 8.00 am - 8.00 pm Monday-Friday and Saturday mornings.</p> <p>Provide better information leaflets for the public about services which they can access in public buildings i.e.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to a telephone • Information Board about Council services • Libraries 					
<p>To develop partnership working arrangements to provide information leaflets about Council services for the public i.e.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local supermarkets/shopping malls • Community and voluntary groups • GP Surgeries 					
<p>Develop well trained personnel to provide the highest level of customer care to the public.</p>					
<p>To have more flexible staffing arrangements to handle effective service delivery.</p>					

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