

Executive Summary of the Investigation Report on the Operation of the Integrated Call Centre

Introduction

The Integrated Call Centre (ICC), managed by the Efficiency Unit (EU) of the Chief Secretary for Administration's Office of the Government Secretariat, was set up to provide a one-stop service for enquiries and complaints. Starting in July 2001, ICC has progressively taken over the operation of over 60 hotlines formerly operated by 12 Government departments. Since then, the Office of The Ombudsman had received complaints about ICC's handling of public enquiries and complaints. They were indicative of problems in the operation of ICC, best resolved before further expansion of ICC.

No. of complaints received by	ICC	The Ombudsman
July 2001 – September 2002	69	16
October 2002 – May 2003	74	14
Total	143	30

2. The Ombudsman, therefore, declared a direct investigation under Section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance on 4 October 2002.

Ambit

3. The ambit of the investigation covers :

- (a) the intended and actual operation of ICC in responding to public enquiries and complaints;
- (b) arrangements adopted by ICC for :
 - (i) referring to the responsible Government organisations those enquiries and/or complaints which ICC cannot respond to immediately,
 - (ii) monitoring responses of Government organisations to these referrals;
 - (iii) replying to the enquirer/complainant; and
 - (iv) keeping ICC's information database comprehensive and up-to-date;
- (c) the deployment, training and support for ICC staff;
- (d) the adequacy and effectiveness of (a), (b) and (c); and
- (e) areas for improvement, if any.

The Integrated Call Centre

4. The ICC is located at Kowloon Government Offices in Yau Ma Tei. It has a total of 101 agents and 12 supervisors.

5. The ICC concept involves use of both telephony and information technology. Through an Interactive Voice Recording System, incoming calls are directed to various operators on the basis of language or specialty. Operators use a computerised system to look up information in a knowledge base to provide an immediate response to callers or to send messages to the appropriate department for follow-up action. The computer system also logs calls for monitoring and statistical analysis.

6. EU envisaged that ICC would benefit all parties -- more convenience and better service to the public, operational and efficiency gains for client departments, plus increased productivity, improved management and a positive image for Government.

7. On 1 November 2001, parallel to the 60 departmental hotlines, EU introduced the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link single-number hotline, also catering for public enquiries and complaints.

8. Under Service Level Agreements between EU and client departments, ICC is expected to meet certain performance measures such as maintaining :

- (a) the abandoned calls rate to less than 10 percent of the total calls;
- (b) an answer rate of at least 80 percent of calls to within 12 seconds; and
- (c) the first call resolution for enquiries to 90 percent (i.e. the enquiries resolved at the time of first contact with a caller).

The Investigation

9. Investigation Officers of this Office met with representatives of EU, ICC and client departments. We also issued a questionnaire to survey client departments' views on the performance of ICC.

10. We visited ICC and the call centres operated by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the Water Supplies Department (WSD). We also took reference from the private sector call centre operated by PCCW Ltd., which provides customer service and technical support to its subsidiary.

Case Studies

11. The 16 complaint cases examined by this Office (see table in para 1) were reviewed as background material for the investigation. The nature of the complaints may be categorised as :

- (a) delay in reply or lack of response (8 cases);
- (b) misinterpretation of information (3 cases);

- (c) misassignment of complaints (3 cases);
- (d) lack of situational information in knowledge base (1 case); and
- (e) call-handling capacity and contingency (1 case).

Observations and Opinions

12. ICC has brought improvement to public enquiry service. A survey conducted by ICC in November 2002 indicated that callers were, in general, “quite satisfied” with various aspects of ICC’s operation and performance. Compared with the former departmental hotlines, ICC’s full-time operation offers a significant improvement in convenience to callers. Access has also improved. In addition, ICC call agents are considered to have better telephone manners and interpersonal skills. Access to a computerised knowledge base enables most enquiries to be dealt with at the point of first contact, without referral to client departments. There are financial, management and efficiency gains.

13. Our investigation identified areas for further improvement with ICC operation, as mentioned below.

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

14. The rigid format of ICC data templates has unnecessarily prolonged the updating process. This results in misassignment or misdirection of calls and increases backroom work for client departments.

Misassignment of Cases, Staff Training and Work Allocation

15. Call agents undergo a comprehensive training programme, following which they are expected to handle calls for all ICC client departments. Feedback from departments indicated that some agents were not fully familiar with departmental operations and this led to misassignment/misdirection. Departments also noted that ICC’s performance level had dropped as the number of client departments increased since mid-2002, indicative of inadequate manpower or unsatisfactory work allocation.

Call Centre Identity, Accountability and Personal Data Privacy

16. The ICC answers calls in the name of client departments. This raises concern about transparency, accountability and the caller’s personal data privacy. The public may be less concerned with who deals with their calls, as long as they are handled satisfactorily. However, the fact is that members of the public are not communicating with whom they expect. Some departments felt that their reputation may be affected by proxy if ICC mishandles calls on their behalf. Six participating departments preferred ICC to identify itself outright.

One-Stop Service

17. The original intention was for ICC to provide a one-stop service for complaints and enquiries. This has been partly achieved by integrating over 60 departmental hotlines into one call centre. Government eventually intends to move to a single-number hotline for all enquiries and

complaints. There is no timetable yet for such migration.

Management Culture and Working Relationship

18. ICC's organisational culture is more task- than people-oriented. Some client departments considered ICC to dominate rather than accommodate as an agent should. The relationship between ICC and client departments bears review and realignment for more cordial and cooperative partnership.

Conclusions and Recommendations

19. The Ombudsman has made the following recommendations to improve the operation of ICC in the light of Head of EU's comments :

Maintenance of the Knowledge Base

- (a) Greater regard should be given to the different requirements of individual client departments. The knowledge base should be updated promptly and kept current.
- (b) Consideration should be given to linking the knowledge base to Government's Geographical Information System datamap.

Misassignment of Cases to Departmental Staff

- (c) Misdirection/misassignment errors should be systematically monitored and corrective measures incorporated into the knowledge base.
- (d) ICC should monitor progress of enquiries/complaints and remind client departments accordingly. Messages should be forwarded promptly and reminders not issued prematurely.
- (e) EU should carry out annual reviews of the knowledge base at a more global level to update departmental policies and procedures not otherwise covered in the day-to-day updating.

Staff Training and Work Allocation

- (f) There should be a team responsible for interdepartmental co-ordination. Teams specialising in dealing with enquiries or complaints on particular subjects or departments should be set up. These teams will replace the back-end team to handle complex cases or calls which cannot be resolved in the first contact.
- (g) Client departments should brief ICC staff from time to time to enhance their knowledge of their department operations.

Call Centre Identity

- (h) ICC should answer calls in its own name. Reference to hotline numbers in departmental telephone directories should indicate that calls are handled by ICC.

- (i) There should be publicity to promote awareness of the ICC and its relationship with client departments.

Accountability

- (j) ICC should shed its anonymity, particularly if it is to continue to use the departmental hotlines.
- (k) ICC should provide client departments with regular statistics on complaints received.

Personal Data Privacy

- (l) Callers' consent should be obtained when the ICC passes their personal data to client departments or third parties.

One-Stop Service

- (m) To make for a one-stop service in practice and in name, the long-term solution is to migrate to a single hotline number, say, 1823 Citizen's Easy Link.
- (n) There should be a live operator to screen and forward calls to the appropriate specialist team.

Departmental Call Centres

- (o) Departments should be given the option of having their own call centres or joining the ICC scheme.

Management Culture

- (p) A review should be undertaken to examine and address management-staff issues.

Working Relationship

- (q) EU and ICC should strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation with client departments through established channels, i.e. liaison groups and steering committee meetings.
- (r) EU should determine the appropriate service role for ICC, review ICC's management culture and arrange training for management staff.

Comments from EU

20. In the course of our investigation, EU has initiated some improvement and updated the technology. It has also agreed to implement recommendations on management culture and working relationship. EU however has reservation on recommendations (f), (h) and (i). EU considers that the setting up of specialised teams will defeat the concept of one-stop service and downgrade the performance of ICC. EU also prefers to continue its practice of answering the departmental hotlines in the name of departments to prevent the callers from the confusion of being answered by an unrelated party. EU is promoting the 1823 Citizen's Easy Link in July 2003 and

in so doing, will also publicise the partnership between ICC and client departments.

The Ombudsman's Final Remarks

21. The Ombudsman maintains that an open Government should be accountable and transparent to the public and the recommendations (h) and (i) aim to uphold these principles. On the issue of screening calls for forwarding to specialised teams, we believe our recommendation will minimise misdirection or misassignment of cases. The Ombudsman, therefore, considers that these recommendations should stand. This Office will continue to liaise with EU on progress with the implementation of these recommendations.

Acknowledgement

22. The Ombudsman thanks the Head, Efficiency Unit, 12 participating departments, EPD, WSD and PCCW for their co-operation and assistance throughout this investigation. She is particularly grateful for the serious attitude of EU towards this investigation.

Office of The Ombudsman
Ref. OMB/WP/14/1 S.F. 103
July 2003