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CALL CENTRES, REPORT 1 OF THE 2019 SPRING REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL OF CANADA

Report of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts

Honourable Kevin Sorenson, Chair

**JUNE 2019
42nd PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION**

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NOTICE TO READER

Reports from committee presented to the House of Commons

Presenting a report to the House is the way a committee makes public its findings and recommendations on a particular topic. Substantive reports on a subject-matter study usually contain a synopsis of the testimony heard, the recommendations made by the committee, as well as the reasons for those recommendations.

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THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

has the honour to present its

SEVENTIETH REPORT

Pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 108(3)(g), the Committee has studied Report 1, Call Centres, of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada and has agreed to report the following:



CALL CENTRES, REPORT 1 OF THE 2019 SPRING REPORTS OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL OF CANADA

INTRODUCTION

According to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), “Canadians contact the Government of Canada to receive services and benefits that affect their social and economic well-being. Per the findings of a 2018 survey by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, Canadians contacted the government most frequently through in-person visits, at 32%, followed by using a website (28%), using the phone (26%), and using email, mail, or other methods (14%).”¹

The telephone continues to be an important way to contact the federal government despite the rapid growth in digital communication platforms and services (i.e., email, text messages, live chat, social media, etc.). This is especially true for Canadians who are visually impaired; have intellectual or physical disabilities; do not have a computer or Internet access or the skills to use these technologies; or live in rural or remote regions.²

Shared Services Canada (SSC) is responsible for providing and maintaining information technology (IT) and telecommunications across the 221 federal government call centres that serve both the public and the government.³ The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat of Canada’s (TBS) “Policy on Service is the key source of Treasury Board direction to federal departments and agencies on managing their services to clients for all service delivery methods, including call centres. The Secretariat is responsible for providing advice and guidance to departments and agencies in implementing the policy and for overseeing and monitoring compliance with the policy by deputy heads.”⁴

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) operates a number of call centres. In 2017–2018, its call centre for the Employment Insurance program received 25 million

1 Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.1.

2 Ibid., para. 1.3.

3 Ibid., para. 1.8.

4 Ibid., para. 1.7.



calls and its call centre for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security programs received 8 million calls.⁵

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) processes calls from Canadians, foreign nationals, and permanent residents for all departmental services, including those pertaining to travel documents and citizenship applications. In 2017–2018, its call centre received almost 5 million calls.⁶

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) processes calls from veterans and their families about various programs, benefits, services, decisions and appeals; in 2017–2018, its call centre received almost 600,000 calls.⁷

In the spring of 2019, the OAG released a performance audit that assessed the following:

- whether ESDC, IRCC, and VAC provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services;
- whether these departments reported on their call centre performance in a way that was relevant to clients, transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy; and
- whether TBS and SSC provided a strategy and support to enable these services.⁸

It should be noted that neither the funding of the call centres nor the accuracy of the information they provided were examined.⁹

On 30 May 2019, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts (the Committee) held a hearing on this audit, with the following in attendance:

OAG—Sylvain Ricard, Interim Auditor General of Canada, and Jean Goulet, Principal;

5 Ibid., para. 1.4.

6 Ibid., para. 1.5.

7 Ibid., para. 1.6.

8 Ibid., para. 1.9.

9 Ibid., para. 1.11.

TBS—Alex Benay, Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada;

ESDC—Graham Flack, Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development, and Leslie MacLean, Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada;

IRCC—Lori MacDonald, Acting Deputy Minister, and Harpreet Kochhar, Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations;

VAC—General (Ret'd) Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister; and

SSC—Paul Glover, President, and Raj Thuppal, Assistant Deputy Minister, Networks, Security and Digital Services.¹⁰

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Reaching a Call Centre Agent

The OAG concluded callers had difficulty getting through to agents at federal government call centres.¹¹ Specifically, it found that “the Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, and [IRCC] call centres prevented millions of calls from reaching an agent. The departments [informed the OAG] that this happened because the volume of calls exceeded their call centres’ capacities.”¹² Furthermore, instead “of being given the choice of waiting in a queue to reach an agent, they were rerouted to the automated system or asked to check the website or call back later. For example, when call volumes exceeded a threshold determined by [ESDC], the Department sent callers back to the automated system;” IRCC “played a recorded message for the caller to try calling again later and then disconnected the call.”¹³ In contrast, the OAG found that VAC “allowed all callers into the queue to wait for an agent no matter how many callers were on the line.”¹⁴

10 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#).

11 OAG, [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.13.

12 *Ibid.*, para. 1.24.

13 *Ibid.*, para. 1.25.

14 *Ibid.*



In fact, in all three of the audited departments, the OAG found that “for more than a million calls that did get into a queue to wait for an agent, the callers gave up waiting to speak with an agent and hung up themselves.”¹⁵

Lastly, the OAG found that “when calls were answered by an agent, they were not always answered within the departments’ timeliness targets or within the times that callers have stated they are willing to wait.”¹⁶ For example, IRCC’s call centre did not implement a timeliness target, and at 32 minutes, it also had the longest average wait time to reach an agent.¹⁷ Moreover, according to a 2018 survey, Canadians expect “to wait an average of 7 minutes to get information or to start a transaction when they call the Government of Canada. Only two of the selected call centres met that expectation.”¹⁸

Consequently, the OAG recommended that ESDC and IRCC should “review how they manage incoming calls to improve access to agents. The departments should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they prefer to wait, use self-service options, or have the call centre call them back later.”¹⁹

In response to this recommendation, in its Detailed Action Plan, ESDC stated that its “current ability to manage and improve access to a call centre agent is limited by existing technology and funding” and that migrations “of the Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centres to a modernized telephone system are planned to be completed by May 2020.”²⁰ Following this migration, the Department “will conduct a full review of options to improve access to agents within the new technology system,” by March 2021.²¹

On this matter, Graham Flack, Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development, ESDC, provided the following explanation:

There have been two limiters on our performance.

The first is outdated technology. Our legacy technology was limited in terms of having a hard cap on the number of people who could be put in the queue, which has resulted in callers being sent back to the interactive voice response system at peak times. It also

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., para. 1.26.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., para. 1.27.

20 Employment and Skills Development Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 1.

21 Ibid.

didn't allow us to shift calls between our call centres to manage the load. You could have an individual who would be directed to one call centre, and once they were in that queue the technology did not allow us to shift them to one of our different call centres, which may have had agents available.

On this point, ESDC secured funding in budgets 2017 and 2019, which provided \$27.3 million to migrate ESDC's call centres from this outdated technology to a modernized telephone system. As a result, we are well on our way to addressing the issues and are currently in the middle of migrating the new call centre platform that was procured by Shared Services Canada. The new platform is called the "hosted contact centre solution", and it can provide the modern client-centric services Canadians should expect.²²

Additionally, IRCC stated in its action plan that it received \$43 million from Budget 2019 for the following: "reviewing training and work processes to ensure that clients receive support in a respectful and efficient manner; offering clients the choice of asking the Client Support Centre to call them back rather than waiting on hold to speak with an agent; resolving some of the issues that lead clients to seek support; ensuring that the Department's programs and services are designed with the client in mind; and setting the foundation for transformation by improving the Department's technology and tools."²³

Lori MacDonald, Acting Deputy Minister, IRCC, also addressed this matter:

To improve the call centre and overall client experience, we have taken a number of actions. For economic permanent resident programs, we are piloting a new callback feature to give clients who reach our telephone wait queue the option of having an agent call them back instead of having to wait on hold. We are testing this functionality with this client group before expanding the service to other programs. We have also improved self-service features through our interactive voice response telephone messaging. This makes it easier for callers to obtain general and case status information without having to speak to an agent.

Budget 2019 announced \$42.9 million over two years for IRCC to provide clients with better access to support when they need it. This funding will allow us to hire more call centre agents and expand some local Canadian office hours in 2019, and to expand hours of operations at the client support centre in 2020.²⁴

22 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0855.

23 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), pp. 1-2.

24 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0900.



Furthermore, Ms. MacDonald also explained some of the underlying issues that can affect processing times:

We know that to really address call volumes we need to address the root of the problem. One of the key reasons that people call and utilize ATIP processes is for information on their case status. We also receive many calls from people inquiring about the renewal of their permanent residence cards. We are making progress in reducing processing times in almost all of our permanent residence streams and have recently brought processing times for permanent residence cards down considerably. We anticipate that the progress we are making in these key areas will help reduce call volumes.²⁵

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 1—on improving the call centre client experience

That, by 30 June 2020, *Employment and Skills Development Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to managing incoming calls to improve access to agents. Additionally, that a final report be provided by 30 April 2021.

B. Call Centre Client Focus

1. Client Service

Overall, the OAG found that VAC and IRCC did not always consider their clients' needs when making decisions about call centre services. For example, VAC discontinued "teletypewriter (TTY) service for the deaf and hard of hearing without first consulting with or informing veterans," but was unable to "provide documentation on the reasons for the decision."²⁶

The OAG also found that IRCC did not adequately implement a recommendation of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration "to make it easier for clients who do not speak English or French to communicate with the call

25 Ibid.

26 OAG, [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, paras. 1.35 and 1.36.

centre through an interpreter.”²⁷ And, although “the Department responded to that committee’s recommendation by stating that it had a process for clients to bring their own interpreters,” it did not conduct “an analysis to reduce the effort required for callers to use their own interpreters or representatives.”²⁸

2. Setting Service Standards

The OAG found that the call centres examined in this audit did not include all three types of service standards identified by TBS guidance, namely access, accuracy, and timeliness. Specifically, none of these call centres had service standards for access, nor for the accuracy of answers they provide callers, although “all had quality monitoring processes to perform some testing of agent responses.”²⁹ Without such standards, Canadians could not know about expected service levels, and departments have no public commitments to meet them.³⁰

Additionally, IRCC did not have a standard for timeliness. And although VAC and ESDC implemented one, they could not demonstrate that it was developed from client feedback on wait time expectations. For example, VAC was “considering changing its service standard from answering 80% of calls within two minutes to answering 80% of calls within five minutes. The Department’s analysis supporting the change did not discuss how the change might affect service specifically to veterans and was not based on feedback gathered from veterans.”³¹

3. Reporting on Performance

As reported by the Auditor General to the Committee, the issue of inadequate data collection and use is a persistent problem facing federal organizations. Given the significance of sound data in the delivery and accurate assessment of program effectiveness, the Committee has made this issue one of its core priorities.

The OAG found that “when departments reported on their performance against their call centre service standards, they sometimes overstated their results. For example,

27 Ibid., para. 1.38. Also, House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, *Modernization of Client Service Delivery* (Recommendation 1), Ninth Report, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, May 2018.

28 OAG, *Call Centres*, Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.38.

29 Ibid., para. 1.39.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., para. 1.40.



when [VAC] reported on its performance against its service standard to answer 80% of calls in 2 minutes, it did not include calls during which the caller hung up in the first 30 seconds after being put into the queue to speak with an agent. Similarly, when [ESDC] reported on its performance against its service standard to answer 80% of calls within 10 minutes, it did not include calls during which the caller hung up after reaching the queue.”³²

The OAG also found that ESDC and VAC “published call centre performance results that were based on unverified data. These departments used reports that were generated by reporting tools that summarized results. However, these departments did not keep source data and as a result could not verify the results of their reports to ensure that the calculations were accurate.”³³

In fact, although the OAG wanted to verify the results contained in these reports, it could not, because ESDC and VAC “did not identify it as having business value. In contrast, [IRCC] did keep its source data and used it to verify results.”³⁴

Consequently, the OAG recommended that VAC “should review how it provides access to its call centre by the deaf and hard of hearing and ensure its decisions are based on caller feedback.”³⁵

In its Detailed Action Plan, VAC agreed with the recommendation and stated that it will “extend its TTY services to include calls handled by its National Contact Centre Network (NCCN), which is available from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time. To accomplish this, the Department will consult with internal and external experts, acquire the necessary equipment and/or software, conduct preliminary testing, and then implement the service. Implementation will include promoting the availability of the service internally and externally. Future decisions regarding access to the Department’s call centre will be based on caller feedback, including the Department’s Client Satisfaction Survey data.”³⁶

Further to this point, Gen (Ret’d) Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister, VAC, provided the following:

32 Ibid., para. 1.41.

33 Ibid., para. 1.42.

34 Ibid., para. 1.43.

35 Ibid., para. 1.45.

36 Veterans Affairs Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 1.

The Auditor General's report found that we did not always consider the needs of our veteran clients when making decisions about call centre services. One specific example is with respect to teletype service. When the department stopped offering a teletypewriter service for the hearing disabled, there was no indication from our records as to the rationale for this cut in service, nor whether there was consultation with veterans. This is not appropriate service.

As such, we are reversing the decision to ensure that all veterans, regardless of their injuries, can access our call services. We are also committed to ensuring that veterans with hearing difficulties can communicate with the national contact centre network.³⁷

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 2—on improving access for the deaf and hard of hearing

That, by 30 June 2020, *Veterans Affairs Canada* provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to A) improving call centre access for the deaf and hard of hearing; and B) how decisions pertaining to call centre services are based on quality evidence.

The OAG also recommended that ESDC, IRCC, and VAC should:

- set call centre service standards that are relevant to clients and consider client feedback as per the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Guideline on Service Standards; and
- publish call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner and verify the results to confirm accuracy.³⁸

In its action plan, ESDC stated that it has completed a review of current service standards, including client consultation, and committed to also:

- Amend the service level calculation to include abandoned calls for which the caller waited at least 10 minutes (the service standard target);
- Increase frequency in public reporting of call centre performance results; and

37 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0910.

38 OAG, [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.46.



- Operationalize a regular data validation approach, to continue to confirm data validity, to be refreshed after implementing the new call centre technology platform.³⁹

Further regarding how the Department will improve in this area following the audit, Leslie MacLean, Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada, ESDC, explained the following:

On this observation from the Auditor General, we had not been tracking callers who hung up on us, as an external reporting tool. We always tracked it internally to see what's going on with our calls, because we monitor them very closely on a day-to-day basis. However, based on this observation, we're now going to start tracking—and have done so, as of April 2019—those callers who hang up after the 10-minute service standard has expired. That will be part of our public reporting going forward.⁴⁰

Similarly, IRCC stated in its action plan that it will:

- Consult clients on wait time preferences for telephone and email support for example through targeted client satisfaction surveys;
- Publish information on its website regarding wait times for client support services in order to provide information to help clients decide how they wish to receive support; and
- Establish service standards for key client support services (including call center services).⁴¹

Lori MacDonald spoke to these efforts by confirming that “IRCC is also working to finalize and publish service standards for its client support centre in our support services to make the department more accountable in its actions.”⁴²

VAC stated in its action plan that in further to implementing a standard based on client feedback, it will publish National Contact Centre Network service standard results annually in conjunction with the release of its Departmental Results Report, and will

39 Employment and Skills Development Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 2.

40 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0925.

41 Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 2.

42 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0905.

“adjust its current methodology to accurately account for abandoned calls when reporting results publicly.”⁴³

Speaking about these matters, Walter Natynczyk explained the following:

Turning to service standards, it should be noted that the department regularly reviews our objectives to understand what we're doing right, and where we need to improve. Our 2017 External Service Standard Review found that our service standards were appropriate. Therefore, the tasks at hand are to up our game, focus on improving processes, and reduce turnaround times.

We agree with the recommendations on service standards in the Auditor General's report and will seek veteran feedback when planning any future changes to service standards. In the near term, we are pursuing an approach to employ post-phone call survey responses to measure veteran satisfaction.⁴⁴

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 3—on establishing, publishing, and measuring call centre service standards

That a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to A) establishing relevant call centre service standards that are based on client feedback; B) publishing call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner; and C) verifying their results to confirm their accuracy, be provided to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts as follows:

- **from *Employment and Skills Development Canada* by 30 June 2020 (along with a final report by 30 April 2021);**
- **from *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada* by 30 June 2020; and**
- **from *Veterans Affairs Canada* by 31 October 2019.**

Finally, the OAG found that TBS “did not provide clear direction to ensure that departments and agencies respected the principles of good service in the Policy on Service,” nor did it “sufficiently monitor whether departments set call centre service standards and whether departments reported accurately on their performance in

43 Veterans Affairs Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), pp. 1-2.

44 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0910.



meeting client needs.”⁴⁵ Thus, it recommended that TBS “should clarify direction on call centre services and lead departments and agencies to help ensure that

- their call centre service standards follow the Treasury Board’s policies on service, with emphasis on relevance to clients, consistency across government, and transparency; and
- they publish call centre service standards and performance results that are transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy.”⁴⁶

In its action plan, TBS stated that by April 2020 it “will identify potential changes to policy instruments to improve service standards for all service delivery channels, including call centres. The Secretariat will also continue to work with service delivery departments and enhance existing guidance on the development and publication of client-centric service standards.”⁴⁷

On this point, Alex Benay, Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada, TBS, provided the following:

Over the past few years, TBS has developed various policy instruments to help departments take a more client-centric approach to the design and delivery of services, including the development and publication of service standards. While we've made progress, we agree that there is still much work to be done.

I'm glad to say that we have already begun this work. Currently, [TBS] is reviewing existing policy instruments, with the goal of identifying opportunities to strengthen policies to better support improved services through all service delivery channels, including call centres.

In spring 2018, the government approved targeted amendments to the policy on the management of information technology and the policy on the management of information, setting the foundation for the long-term development of a comprehensive policy on service and digital for the Government of Canada.

This proposed policy will build on the client-centric principles of the current Policy on Service, and provide direction for the design and development of seamless, integrated services that meet the needs and expectations of the Canadian public.⁴⁸

45 OAG, [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.44.

46 Ibid., para. 1.47.

47 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 1.

48 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0850.

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 4—on clarifying direction on call centre services

That, by 30 May 2020, the *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat* provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to clarifying direction on call centre services and lead departments and agencies so that A) service standards follow Treasury Board policies; and B) service standards are published and performance results are transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy.

C. The Future of Call Centres

According to the OAG, although SSC “had an initiative to modernize departmental call centres, it was delayed by years because [the Department] underestimated the cost and amount of work needed to implement the project.”⁴⁹ Specifically, though the initiative began in 2013, delays in the contracting process meant the work could not begin until 2017, which caused problems for certain call centres. In 2017, this initiative was further delayed when SSC concluded “that it would be too expensive to move all 221 call centres over to the new system by 2020. Instead, the Department decided to bring call centres onto the new system in two phases. The first phase was to roll out the new system by 2018 to only 8 large call centres, and the second phase was to focus on the remaining 213.”⁵⁰

The OAG found that SSC underestimated the amount of work needed to prepare departments and agencies to move to the new call centre system, which also resulted in delays. For example, its planning overlooked the work needed to upgrade its existing IT infrastructure; moreover, “use of the system in both official languages as well as built-in features to ensure accessibility for call centre agents with visual impairments had defects that needed to be corrected. These delays pushed the first phase end date to 2020.”⁵¹

The OAG also found that SSC “had not yet finalized a plan for modernizing the remaining 213 call centres. [It had] compiled an inventory of Government of Canada call centres, but it was incomplete because [SSC] had not yet confirmed the total number of call centres or consulted with departments to determine their business needs. [SSC] also

49 OAG, [Call Centres](#), Report 1 of the 2019 Spring Reports of the Auditor General of Canada, para. 1.57.

50 Ibid., paras. 1.58 and 1.59.

51 Ibid., para. 1.60.



had not yet determined the scheduling and costing for modernizing the remaining call centres.”⁵² The lack of modernization increases the risk of aging IT infrastructure failure or software obsolescence.⁵³

Lastly, according to the OAG, TBS developed the Government of Canada Clients First Service Strategy, which “prioritized providing services online but did not include call centres or mention the government-wide modernization of call centres, despite the fact that they continue to be an important way for clients to get information.”⁵⁴

Consequently, the OAG recommended the following:

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat should include call centres as part of its government-wide approach to services. Shared Services Canada, as part of its initiative to modernize the remaining Government of Canada call centres, should

- consult with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat to ensure the modernization initiative is in line with the Secretariat’s government-wide approach to services, and
- ensure the initiative includes a complete inventory of call centres and the business needs of departments and agencies.⁵⁵

In its action plan, TBS committed to including call centres as part of its government-wide approach to services considering “all service delivery channels, including call-centres as part of all governance and policy development activities related to service” and supporting “departments and agencies in their initiatives to improve call centre services.”⁵⁶

When questioned about what had changed since the Government of Canada introduced its Government of Canada Clients First Service Strategy in 2017, Alex Benay explained that the strategy was supposed to be ‘channel agnostic,’ meaning it was not “necessarily targeting one particular service channel.”⁵⁷ However, since reviewing this audit’s

52 Ibid., para. 1.61.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., para. 1.62.

55 Ibid., para. 1.63.

56 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 2.

57 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 1010.

recommendations, TBS “will integrate phones into the next series and issues of our June release for the digital policy and all the policy instruments that will come with it, and [will] become very specific on various service channels.”⁵⁸

Similarly, SSC stated in its action plan that it is “working with partners to update the Contact Centre [i.e., call centres] inventory and requirements, which will support the identification of the best-fit and most cost effective solutions for modernizing the remaining contact centres. The target completion for this analysis is the first quarter of fiscal year 2019—2020, at which point [SSC] will present the updated plan to [TBS] and ensure alignment with a whole of government approach to digital services.”⁵⁹

When questioned about its role and progress regarding this modernization, Paul Glover, President, SSC, provided the following:

[It] will be [SSC] that is responsible for the provisioning of that infrastructure and working with the vendor community and departments to make sure that we provide solutions in line with the needs of those departments.

As I said, we started with those that were the most complex and represented almost 50% of the total call volume. We're very confident, given that we've tackled the most complex, and almost half of the total government's call volume, that we can now scale at speed, having learned these important lessons, the remainder of the departments. We're working with them to make sure they don't get a system that is bigger and more complex than they need, or more expensive because it has security they don't need.

We'll be able now, having done the most complicated, to tailor solutions and move quickly to all of the remaining centres. We're working with them to get an inventory of their requirements and will layer on top of that the systems they have, contracts and end-of-life technology. By the fall, we'll have a plan for all of the remaining call centres.⁶⁰

Therefore, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 5—on a government-wide approach

That, by 30 April 2020, the *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat* provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a report outlining what progress

58 Ibid.

59 Shared Services Canada, [Detailed Action Plan](#), p. 1.

60 House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, *Evidence*, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, 16 May 2019, [Meeting No. 140](#), 0930.



has been made with regard to integrating call centres as part of its government-wide approach to client services.

Recommendation 6—on modernizing the remaining call centres

That, by 31 October 2019, *Shared Services Canada* provide the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to completing its modernization of the remaining call centres, including consideration of the *Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's* government-wide approach to client services and the business needs of lead departments and agencies.

CONCLUSION

The Committee concludes that not all of the departments audited by the OAG provided callers with accessible and timely call centre services, and that service standards were not developed, assessed, or reported in a manner that was relevant to clients, transparent, consistent, and based on data that was verified for accuracy.

Additionally, Shared Services Canada did not provide sufficient support to modernize federal government call centre systems.

Lastly, while the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provided a government-wide service strategy that prioritized improvements to online services, it did not mention the modernization of call centres and did not provide clear direction to support departments and agencies in reporting on their call centre performance in a meaningful way; it also did not provide a government-wide approach to ensuring call centre services were available for clients when they wished to call the government.

And although the Committee supports the government's focus on digital services such as email, online and social media platforms, it should not do so at the cost of call centres, given how much Canadians continue to depend upon the telephone as means to communicate with federal organizations, especially as certain segments of the population do not use—or properly know how to use—digital services or lack reliable or affordable access to them; i.e., what Leslie MacLean referred to as the “e-vulnerable.”⁶¹

As part of its study, the Committee has made six recommendations in this report to help the Government of Canada improve its management of call centres, so that it can provide the services that Canadians want and deserve.

61 Ibid., 0950.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AND ASSOCIATED DEADLINES

Table 1—Summary of Recommended Actions and Associated Deadlines

Recommendation	Recommended Action	Deadline
Recommendation 1	ESDC and IRCC should provide the Committee with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to managing incoming calls to improve access to agents. Additionally, that a final report be provided to the Committee.	30 June 2020 and 30 April 2021
Recommendation 2	VAC should provide the Committee with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to A) improving call centre access for the deaf and hard of hearing; and B) how decisions pertaining to call centre services are based on quality evidence.	30 June 2020
Recommendation 3	That a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to A) establishing relevant call centre service standards that are based on client feedback; B) publishing call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner; and C) verifying their results to confirm their accuracy, should be provided to the Committee.	From ESDC by 30 June 2020 (along with a final report by 30 April 2021); From IRCC by 30 June 2020; and From VAC by 31 October 2019.



Recommendation 4	TBS should provide the Committee with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to clarifying direction on call centre services and lead departments and agencies so that A) service standards follow Treasury Board policies; and B) service standards are published and performance results are transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy.	30 May 2020
Recommendation 5	TBS should provide the Committee with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to integrating call centres as part of its government-wide approach to client services.	30 April 2020
Recommendation 6	SSC should provide the Committee with a report outlining what progress has been made with regard to completing its modernization of the remaining call centres, including consideration of the TBS government-wide approach to client services and the business needs of lead departments and agencies.	31 October 2019

APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES

The following table lists the witnesses who appeared before the Committee at its meetings related to this report. Transcripts of all public meetings related to this report are available on the Committee's [webpage for this study](#).

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
Department of Citizenship and Immigration Lori MacDonald, Acting Deputy Minister Harpreet Kochhar, Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations	2019/05/30	140
Department of Employment and Social Development Graham Flack, Deputy Minister, Employment and Social Development Leslie MacLean, Senior Associate Deputy Minister of Employment and Social Development and Chief Operating Officer for Service Canada	2019/05/30	140
Department of Veterans Affairs Walter Natynczyk, Deputy Minister Michel Doiron, Assistant Deputy Minister, Service Delivery	2019/05/30	140
Office of the Auditor General Sylvain Ricard, Interim Auditor General of Canada Jean Goulet, Principal, Performance Audit, Audit Operations	2019/05/30	140
Shared Services Canada Paul Glover, President Raj Thuppal, Assistant Deputy Minister, Networks, Security and Digital Services	2019/05/30	140
Treasury Board Secretariat Alex Benay, Chief Information Officer of the Government of Canada	2019/05/30	140

REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the Committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this Report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* ([Meetings Nos. 140 and 145](#)) is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Hon. Kevin Sorenson, P.C., M.P.
Chair

