

Departmental Specific Responses to the Recommendations in the 11th PACP Report

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) Progress Report

ESDC agrees with the recommendations made by the Committee.

With respect to 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”:

ESDC is committed to maximizing callers’ access to services via telephone, including offering the ability for clients to self-serve through the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and improving access in reaching call centre agents.

Working with Shared Services Canada (SSC), ESDC embarked on a multi-year strategy to migrate its call centres to a modern call centre platform. This system was designed to allow callers the ability to continue accessing the IVR 100% of the time as well as the ability to wait to speak to an agent. These migrations fundamentally changed the ability of ESDC to manage incoming calls and improved the accessibility of clients to both the IVR system and to agents.

The Pensions Call Centre migrated to the new platform in May 2019. Prior to the migration, callers were able to access the queue to wait to speak to an agent 65% of the time. Following the migration, this increased to more than 95% of the time.

The Employment Insurance (EI) Call Centre migrated on March 11, 2020, just as the COVID-19 crisis was fully emerging in Canada. The onset of the pandemic immediately resulted in a surge in calls, which far exceeded any historical demand. At its peak, the EI Call Centre was receiving one million calls a day with 281,000 calls per day trying to reach an agent.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, further multi-year investments totaling \$420M were provided in 2020. In combination with these investments and the implementation of the new platform, the department was able to:

- Activate an emergency toll-free number allowing callers to have their one-week EI waiting period waived as a result of COVID-19.
- Establish a virtual call centre within nine days on a cloud-based platform to support the delivery of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) by redeploying 1,500 resources.
- Quadruple the EI IVR system’s capacity and double the system’s capacity to handle calls in queue. This allowed the EI Call Centre to maintain 100% IVR accessibility since May 6, 2021.
- Initiate a significant on-boarding strategy to increase Call Centre capacity from approximately 1,100 agents to 3,000 agents by the end of March 2021. Full call handling capacity is expected to be in place for summer peak 2021.

In addition, the department has also improved service delivery by introducing Robotic Process Automation (RPA), which helps reduce administration burden, allowing agents to better serve Canadians. With these enhancements in service delivery and having achieved 100%

accessibility, ESDC will explore the opportunity to implement additional advanced features.

While the pandemic presented challenges in terms of system capacity, given the unforeseen volume of calls, ESDC was able to maintain nearly 100% accessibility to Pensions agents. Further, the department managed to improve accessibility to EI agents, when compared to the previous year. The service has been virtually 100% accessible since February 10, 2021.

With respect to Recommendation 3: ESDC, IRCC, and VAC should provide the Committee with “... 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”:

ESDC completed an EI and Pensions program service standard review in December 2018 that included client consultations, confirming that established standards are relevant and generally consistent with client expectations. ESDC is committed to publishing call centre service standards and associated service standard results and data sets in a transparent and consistent manner. The latest results for 2019-20 can be found at (<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/transparency/service-standards-2018-2019.html>). Additionally, the department is on track to enhance its publishing of call centre service standards and performance results through weekly reporting of average wait times by the end of April 2021. These results will be posted on our Contact Us page, which will be found at <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/contact/ei-individual.html> for the EI Call Centre and <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/contact/cpp.html> for the Pensions Call Centre.

ESDC has fully implemented the commitment to operationalize a consistent data validation approach. The department uses detailed transactional data to validate the accuracy of performance results on a daily, weekly, monthly, and annual basis. ESDC uses these additional processes to further ensure the accuracy of their reports:

- Any system issues that affect the reporting tools are documented to ensure that there is a record, and the source for published data is always recorded.
- Several automated tools have been developed to reduce manual data manipulation and the possibility of human error.
- Key reports are reviewed by a second reviewer to ensure data accuracy and integrity.

Daily historical reports are validated against end-of-day snapshots from a real-time reporting tool to ensure information consistency and alignment and to detect potential reporting issues.

Through these validations, the data has proven to be accurate within a 0.004% margin of error for Pensions. For EI, throughout the year, the data is accurate within a 0.005% margin of error with the exception of three weeks in April (March 30 to April 19, 2020) during which the platform experienced technical issues due to the unexpected significant increase in calls resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) Progress Report

IRCC agrees with the recommendations made by the Committee.

With respect to 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”:

Improving IRCC’s client support services to make them timelier and more accessible continues to be a key departmental priority. IRCC’s Client Support Centre (or call centre) provides support to clients by telephone and by email. Commitments stemming from the OAG audit, and PACP recommendations, are monitored quarterly through IRCC’s Departmental Audit Committee.

Since spring 2019, IRCC’s Client Support Centre (CSC) has:

- Hired 308 new call centre agents;
- With regard to expansion of hours, IRCC completed analysis of the minimum number of agents required to maintain the call answer rate while offering extended hours of service in 2020-21. Following consultation with the labour union, agreement was attained to proceed with a pilot to measure the impact of extended hours on the call answer rate, however the pilot is on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pilot exploring the impact of evening and weekend extended hours is on hold, IRCC is offering service from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM wherever you are in Canada.
- Broadened the authorities of CSC agents so they can resolve more enquiries during their first interaction with a client, which has helped to reduce repeat calls;
- Reduced the average turnaround time taken by the CSC to respond to email enquiries from clients, which has incentivized clients with non-urgent questions to communicate with IRCC via email;
- Improved the accessibility for clients to reach an agent by telephone, and;
- Introduced a new functionality to allow clients to get call backs in lieu of waiting on the phone to speak to an agent; this functionality was fully implemented as of December 31, 2019 and for which, IRCC saw a 99.3% satisfaction rate from clients who had selected to receive a call back once they were in the wait queue to speak to an agent.
- Introduced new information on the IRCC “contact us” web page which provides clients with more information regarding how they can obtain support, when needed, and the level of service that they can expect.

Supported by investments from Budget 2019 and internal reallocations to support improvements to client support technology and reduce the root causes of calls, in 2019-20 IRCC increased its call answer rate to over 44% (from 25% the year before), improved email processing times to within four business days (from 10 days the year before), and reduced the number of attempts that it took clients contacting the CSC by telephone to reach the wait queue. While IRCC has made strides in improvements at its CSC, the department acknowledges that further improvements are needed before service levels meet client expectations for timely and accessible support.

To this end, in 2020-21, IRCC continued to make efforts to meet its commitments to improve access to CSC agents despite ongoing service disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including global migration and IRCC’s processing networks. The department’s telephone

support channel was closed from March 19, 2020 to April 27, 2020, to put in place the necessary IT infrastructure and equip its call centre agents to work remotely. Since the resumption of its telephone channel in April 2020, IRCC's CSC has received over 1.99 million enquiries across its three contact channels (telephone, email and the Information Centre for Members of Parliament and Senators), which is a 27% increase compared to the same period in the previous year (1.57 million). IRCC's email support offered through the Client Support Centre remained open with no service disruption. Despite higher intake volumes in 2020-21, IRCC was able to maintain its call answer rate and email response times. According to IRCC's 2020 Client Satisfaction Survey, clients reported having to make fewer attempts before successfully reaching the wait queue (between two and four attempts versus more than five attempts reported in previous surveys).

COVID-19 increased the complexity of support interactions as clients want to know how departmental policies and GC travel restrictions may apply to their unique circumstances. To reassure clients, agents require more time to explain COVID policies and facilitation measures put in place, ensuring clients receive clear and complete information to help alleviate their anxiety and help them take the appropriate next steps.

To ensure improved access to agents (by telephone or email), IRCC has introduced a number of initiatives to address the root causes of client enquiries. These initiatives are designed to allow clients who wish to self-serve using online digital tools the ability to do so, therefore reducing the need for these clients to contact the Client Support Centre with routine or non-complex enquiries and allowing clients with complex enquiries, or those facing vulnerable circumstances (including e-vulnerable clients), greater accessibility to personalized support with live agents.

As part of investments in Budget 2021, IRCC received funding for a 3-year period to maintain enhanced capacity and service standards within its Client Support Centre. With this investment, IRCC will be able to retain the number of Client Support Centre agents hired during the last two years to provide personalized support services to visitors, newcomers and Canadians.

With respect to Recommendation 3: ESDC, IRCC, and VAC should provide the Committee with "... 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":

IRCC regularly engages with stakeholders and clients through consultations, surveys, and user testing on a regular basis with the goal to improve the client experience. IRCC is committed to ensuring that clients will have clear information on wait times (including response times) as well as service options available to them to help them decide how they wish to receive support. IRCC's call-back functionality provides clients the current wait time when they reach the wait queue and they are offered the choice of staying on the line to wait for an agent or to receive a call-back, while maintaining their call priority.

With respect to its CSC, IRCC has:

- Consulted clients on wait time preferences for telephone and email support (for example, through targeted client satisfaction surveys).

- Published information on its website regarding wait times for CSC support services in order to provide information to help clients decide how they wish to receive support.
- Established service standards for key client support services (including call centre services).

With quarterly monitoring through IRCC's Departmental Audit Committee, IRCC has successfully demonstrated that it has met the required actions related to this recommendation. Pre-audit, IRCC did not have publicly available service standards for wait times, though the department had always monitored wait time metrics internally.

Post-audit as of October 2019, IRCC introduced two new questions in its annual Client Satisfaction and Evaluation Survey (CSES) that asks clients about their preferences for wait times for telephone and email support. Feedback from clients informs IRCC decision-making regarding service standards and future service improvements. The department is committed to continuing to monitor wait time metrics and engage clients on their wait time preferences moving forward so that it can be resilient and respond to changes in client needs and preferences.

In December 2019, IRCC published service standards for Client Support Centre telephone and email services which were established with input from clients, and service standard wording underwent usability testing. The department is set to begin reporting against the new call centre service standards as part of the 2020-2021 reporting cycle.

Email Enquiries

- IRCC Standard: acknowledge receipt of web form enquiries (emails) within one business day and answer them within three business days. This applies to email enquiries that do not require coordination with other offices or additional follow-up. These will be responded to on a case by case basis.
- IRCC Target: meet this standard 80% of the time.

Telephone Enquiries

- IRCC Standard: 50% of calls requesting an agent reach the wait queue, and for clients to wait 30 minutes or less once in the queue.
- IRCC Target: meet this standard 80% of the time.

In its audit report, the OAG found that IRCC kept its source data of all client interactions and used it to verify its results. It continues to be a priority for IRCC to maintain the integrity of its performance reporting. In addition to annual public reporting, IRCC monitors its call centre performance on a daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly basis, though only annual reporting is publicly available at this time.

Performance reporting against any IRCC service standard is based on data that is verifiable to ensure accuracy. IRCC has a Data Protocol Unit in place, reporting to the departmental Chief Data Officer (CDO), to independently verify the accuracy and reliability of performance reporting against service standards. Reporting of IRCC's Client Support Centre follows all established data protocols.

In summary, IRCC is committed to publishing call centre service standards and associated

service standard results and data sets in a transparent and consistent manner. As part of the 2020-21 reporting cycle, this information will be published both on the Open Government Portal (open.canada.ca) and the IRCC web site <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/mandate/service-declaration/service-standards.html>.

Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) Progress Report

VAC agrees with the recommendations made by the Committee.

With respect to 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”:

VAC reinstated a teletypewriter (TTY) solution for clients with hearing difficulty to ensure direct access to VAC’s National Contact Centre Network (call centre). TTY service for the call centre had been previously eliminated due to obsolete equipment. VAC acknowledges that the decision was made without enough consultation. VAC consulted with Shared Services Canada (SSC) to identify and implement a TTY solution that would seamlessly integrate with the existing equipment platform. VAC acquired the necessary equipment/software, tested and implemented the solution.

Following implementation and user testing, VAC trained its employees on the handling of TTY inquiries and developed and implemented a communications plan to ensure internal and external user awareness. This included promoting TTY services in VAC’s decision letters, on its external Web site and through social media. An operational Question and Answer document and a business process are available for staff responding to TTY inquiries. As a result of these actions, TTY service for VAC’s call centre was reinstated and has been operational since September 9, 2019. TTY service is also available for VAC Assistance Services (psychological support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year) and inquiries are answered immediately.

With respect to progress made on basing decisions pertaining to call centre services on quality evidence, VAC is committed to continuous improvement. All future decisions regarding access to the call centre will consider caller feedback. VAC will use both the results of its National Survey and its Post Call Automated Survey to inform future decisions or changes to call centre services. VAC implemented this automated telephone survey in the fall of 2018. The brief automated telephone survey assesses callers’ degree of satisfaction with services provided through the call centre. The VAC National Survey, conducted every two years, includes a section on “Communicating with VAC” that will provide further insight, as it includes the phone channel as an option. Results of the most recent survey are expected to be posted by April 2021.

With respect to Recommendation 3: ESDC, IRCC, and VAC should provide the Committee with “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”:

Service standards for VAC's National Contact Centre Network (call centre) are informed by the results of the VAC National Survey. Development of these standards also takes into consideration client feedback gained through the Post-call Survey, implemented in 2018. Post-call survey results are reviewed on a regular basis and adjusted as necessary to ensure VAC understands the needs and expectations of clients. Results from these surveys allow us to ensure that our service standards are relevant to those we serve.

VAC is committed to publishing call centre service standards and associated service standard results and data sets in a transparent and consistent manner. This information is published both on the Open Government Portal (open.canada.ca) and the VAC web site (veterans.gc.ca). The latest results (for 2019-2020) can be found on at <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-us/service-standards>.

VAC is also committed to verifying accuracy of results and, to this end, performance results and client feedback are monitored regularly. VAC continues to review the Post-call Survey responses for client satisfaction to improve service and inform future changes.

VAC has also developed tools and metrics in its equipment platform (Intelligent Call Exchange - ICE system) to support the accuracy of the information being relayed. Reporting tools and data include the number of calls received/answered and the achieved grade of service. VAC's data analysts have established a methodology to confirm the accuracy of the call reporting system.

Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) Progress Report

TBS agrees with the recommendations made by the Committee.

With respect to 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":

As part of its government-wide approach to supporting departments and agencies in improving services, TBS has developed and implemented clear direction on service standards relating to all service delivery channels, including call centre services. The new Treasury Board Policy on Service and Digital and the Directive on Service and Digital, which both came into effect on April 1, 2020, articulate clear requirements for departments and agencies related to the establishment, publication, reporting, and the review of service standards for services provided by call centres and all other delivery channels. In addition, TBS published in 2020 a new Guideline on Service and Digital that provides key considerations and best practices relating to the management of service standards and ensuring that related performance results are transparent, consistent, and verifiable.

In addition, the Directive on Service and Digital requires departments and agencies to regularly review their service standards, related targets and performance information, for all services and all service delivery channels in use, to ensure that they reflect the needs and expectations of clients. It also requires that real-time performance information for service standards be available on the department's web presence, in accordance with TBS direction and guidance. Through its

annual Management Accountability Framework (MAF) assessment of the service management area, TBS requires departments to report on their service standards and related performance by service channel. TBS will continue to work with departments to ensure ongoing progress in this area.

With respect to 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”:

TBS continues to work with SSC on the integration and modernization of call centres as part of its government-wide approach to client services. For example, the TBS Service and Digital Target Enterprise Architecture White Paper endorsed by GC Enterprise Architecture Review board (GCEARB) on December 3, 2020, includes call centres as a government-wide approach to services, with emphasis on relevance to clients and consistency across government to services, as part of the target state architecture.

The Government remains committed to the modernization of call centres, providing clear direction in supporting departments and agencies to report on their call centre performance in a meaningful way; and to provide a government-wide approach to ensuring call centre services are available and accessible for clients. TBS will work with departments and agencies to ensure that clients are informed of expected wait times and other service delivery metrics. This will help ensure the transparency and client-centricity of service standards for call centres and other service delivery channels.

Shared Services Canada (SSC) Progress Report

SSC agrees with the recommendations made by the Committee.

With respect to 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”:

SSC supplies the underlying service technology for departments and agencies it serves to implement call centres, hereafter referred to as “contact centres” as the function includes services not limited to calls. These contact centres enable their communication with various stakeholders, both external and internal to the GC, so that Canadians and businesses have access to vital information, services, and supports in areas such as social services and benefits, immigration, and regulatory obligations.

As recommended by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), SSC engaged all contact centre departments to identify business and technical requirements. From this engagement and analysis, SSC confirmed that many of the technologies supporting contact centres were either outdated, offered limited capabilities for their evolution, or had soon-to-expire vendor-hosted contracts. SSC also determined that there was a range of complexity across the contact centres, resulting in different levels of efforts and costs required to modernize them.

To address the immediate issues and allow for the departments to evolve their contact centres,

SSC has established a new method of supply for both traditional vendor-hosted and public cloud solution offerings. This method provides the agility that department contact centres require to rapidly augment their infrastructure capacity to support increases in call volumes and adopt new capabilities, such as social media and chatbots. It also provides options and flexibility to ensure that departments modernization activities find the “best-fit” solution to meet immediate and future needs based on the requirements they identified during SSC’s discovery analysis in 2019 and through ongoing engagement with SSC.

SSC’s partners are responsible for monitoring and reporting performance metrics in relation to their specific contact centres, including call volumes and calls dropped. SSC’s role is to ensure that client solutions allow for this depth of monitoring and reporting, and to monitor and report capacity usage from a platform perspective across all Contact Centres. SSC has established new Contact Centre services contracting vehicles allowing for more in-depth monitoring and reporting than what was available on the legacy technologies. Partners are now better able to accurately report on key business metrics (e.g. calls presented, calls answered, call dropped, etc.).

SSC delivers the underlying technology infrastructure that supports 221 contact centres. Within these department contact centres, there are approximately 15,000 agents that provide online information and services, and respond to millions of enquiries and searches for information annually by phone, fax or email. Through its discovery analysis, SSC has categorized the 221 contact centres into three tiers according to the complexity and costs required to modernize them:

- 15 Tier 1 high-complexity contact centres: These are the most critical citizen-facing contact centres and, generally, are also the largest in size from an agent and call volume perspective. They require modern infrastructure solutions that ensure a high level of security, operational performance, and availability. These solutions offer departments: the ability to handle a higher volume of calls; integration with Government of Canada systems; and call and screen recording capabilities for training and quality assurance. The majority of these contact centres are currently being migrated to virtual contact centres services infrastructure, allowing agents to work from anywhere at anytime.
- 121 Tier 2 medium-complexity centres: These contact centres are small to medium in size and, in addition to providing GC services to Canadians and businesses, may also provide internal services to GC employees. The business needs and requirements associated with these contact centres do not require the same availability and other needs as a Tier 1 contact centre and as a result require a less complex solution.
- 85 Tier 3 low-complexity centres: These contact centres generally provide one external phone number that supports voice channels to automatically direct the dialer to either the next available agent or another contact centre phone number and, therefore, do not require a call menu or other automated options and operate with a small number of agents.

Consequently, SSC in collaboration with departments has developed a five-year modernization roadmap that prioritizes contact centres using solutions that are considered at end-of-life/end-of-support stages first, and then prioritizes other types of contact centres based on contract expiry

timelines. The Tier 3 contact centres, which predominately use telephony solutions, are modernized through regular telephony infrastructure evergreening or upgrades, or as GC departments request new capabilities or features.

Of the 136 Tier 1 and 2 contact centres, 76 require modernization and they are included in SSC's five-year modernization roadmap (fiscal year 2021-22 to 2025-26). Timelines for modernization are dependent on funding and agreement from partners on when and how they would like to move forward. SSC has solutions available but does not have policy authority to enforce the partner to modernize their contact centres. It is important to note that departments play a pivotal role as the business owners in prioritizing the modernization, allocating resources, funding new features, determining, and confirming modernization dates within this plan. Note that 25 contact centres do not require modernization, and 35 have already been modernized.

In March 2020, in collaboration with ESDC, SSC sought endorsement from the GC EARB for increased Hosted Contact Centre Service (HCCS) usage and a plan to begin modernizing the Tier 2 end-of-life, end-of-support contact centres in fiscal year 2020-2021.

However, COVID-19 forced SSC to rapidly adjust priorities away from the planned modernization activities for fiscal year 2020-21 towards urgently implementing new contact centres and increasing capacity on existing solutions to meet the unprecedented level of call volumes received at critical Government of Canada contact centres (e.g. ESDC and CRA). While COVID-19 caused a delay in modernization activities, it highlighted the requirement for contact centre solutions to support elasticity, flexibility, and agility. The result is SSC's new method of supply that helps to address these challenges.