
“Music To Your Ears?”

The impact of call centres on the public library service

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Abstract

This study reports on the increase that is taking place in local government with regards to the installation of call centres for departments, focusing on public libraries and the possible impacts this has on the service. The subject is discussed using three themes that have been identified from the research, these being the importance a call centre can have within a library service, the management of council call centres and the impact on library staff.

Conclusions are drawn from each of these areas and recommendations for further study are also stated. The findings suggest that there will be a continued growth in the number of library services using call centres to deal with basic telephone enquiries. There are also reasons to believe that the management policies within call centres can lead to a quality service being offered to users. Some library staff have noticed changes to their working patterns, finding they have more opportunities to provide a better face-to-face service with fewer interruptions, but also have some concerns with the quality of service given from operators who may not have any prior experience of libraries.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.0 Background

This study assesses the impact of call centres on the public library service in England and Wales. The basic framework of the research was provided by a former student of the Information Studies department who, at the time of the study was in employment with an authority who were preparing to implement a council call centre, which the library service was to be part of. It was thought on her part that it would make an interesting investigation, as at the time of this study little readily available information exists on the impact of call centres on library services. However, it should be noted that call centre developments in local government are fairly recent, with all known examples occurring within the last five years.

Initial research into this area justified the relevance of this study by revealing concerns by authors such as Milner (1997) with regard to the treatment of those users who use the telephone to contact the public library:

'Practitioners will be all too aware that at certain peak times the pressure imposed on frontline staff to handle customers in front of them as well as those attempting to connect with the service point via the telephone, can often be severe.'

Therefore the implementation of a call centre is something that may reduce the level of abandoned calls that authorities are faced with. This runs parallel with factors such as the number of rings before a call is answered and the number of call transfers. The problem is especially apparent when a library has only one phone line (staff may feel less obliged to spend too much time on calls than they could). In the interests of customer care a call centre may be a valid addition to service provision.

The flip side to the problem relates to aspects such as funding and staffing. Public sector information providers need to justify that there is a need for such call facilities. Start-up costs for the proposed call centre in West Sussex are put at £2.2m with £1.7m needed each year to run it (Chichester Observer, 2003). Whereas changes in work practices may require alterations to employee tasks, which may result in retraining, restructuring or redundancy.

1.1 Aims

The Primary aim of the dissertation is to focus entirely on the impact of call centres on public libraries. Material for which has been lacking at the present time. It is acknowledged that some reference to Councils in general will occur due to the integration of services within many call centres. It is hoped that this research will provide an informative and balanced account of the role call centres can have within public library authorities.

The focus is to look at the various stages that library authorities are at in relation to application of call centres. These will include those who have call centres currently in use, those who have them proposed and those who have rejected or have not considered their use. This study does not aim to be a technical evaluation of call centre technology, although some reference to this area may be necessary from time to time.

1.2 Objectives

In response to the overall aim, a number of objectives have been identified from the literature. These have been split into different areas that can be affected by the call centre approach. These are as follows:

Management

- **To establish the importance a call centre can have within a library service**

This includes the functions that should be carried out, such as item renewals, general enquiries and reservations, or more complex reference queries that could require online searching. Do integrated council call centres really benefit library users or are they just included as part of the service with little input into their design from libraries? Are call centres actually needed, are there alternative methods on offer that provide an equal or better service?

- **To investigate the management policies that are applied to call centres**

A call centre based service would need to ensure that users could expect the same standard of service for equivalent functions in the library. The decisions from management on staffing issues, such as training and workload handling need to be addressed as badly implemented strategies may lead to poor job performance.

Service Delivery

- **To examine the impact of call centres on library staff**

The implementation of call centres can create issues surrounding staffing in libraries. Jobs may be lost, restructured or created, depending on the situation. If a call centre takes on the traditional roles of library workers there may be fewer faces behind the counters.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.0 Background

A call centre has been described as 'a physical or virtual operation within an organisation in which a managed group of people spend most of their time doing business by telephone, usually working in a computer-automated environment' (Call Centre Association, cited in Gilmore, 2001). It has been commonplace for many years for well-established private sector companies, whose roles require heavy telephone interaction, to use call centres. In common with most trends, the public sector has begun to adopt such policies and now many councils use call centre technology as a way of diverting calls to a centrally managed environment, whereby call centre staff are trained to deal with the enquiries for a number of different departments. This chapter will begin with an overview of call centres as it is felt important to illustrate the working practices that exist in the industry before focusing more closely on the relation with local government and the library service.

2.1 Call centres- 'the private sector phenomenon'

Nationwide, the call centre industry has become the fastest growing job market in the UK and around one in every 50 employees are said to work in this type of environment (Hilpern, 2001). There are around 4,500 call centres providing some 400,000 jobs, more than those employed in the coal, steel and car industries put together (Which?, 2003; Goodchild, 2003; Allison, 2001). The benefits for users should include receiving a quicker service; they do not have to travel in order to visit an outlet or apply in writing. They can also contact outside of normal working hours.

The benefits for the organisation include cost savings due to the ability of establishing a call centre in any location, away from the high street where land will be cheaper, and also technological advances in IT (NAO, 2002:11). However this industry has been blighted by horror stories relating to poor working conditions, job instability and low wages. The overall situation is best described by S Veale (cited in Allison, 2001b) Senior Employment Rights Officer of the TUC:

“Although there are very good call centres, there are also some very bad ones where the attitude of managers is appalling and conditions resemble Victorian sweated industry.”

Internal difficulties that are faced by frontline call centre staff in establishments where managers are less sympathetic to their workers needs, may lead to lower levels of service quality. Previous studies suggest that there is often a conflict of interest between the more manageable areas such as organisational efficiency and the intangible factors, including staff well-being and turnover (Gilmore, 2001; Brown & Maxwell, 2002; Dean 2002). Problems that can be encountered by call centre staff have the potential to lead to both mentally and physically damaging outcomes if left untouched for a significant period of time. Research by Callaghan (cited in Matthews, 2000) states that staff turnover runs high in call centre industry, the average length of stay for employees is only 18 months to 2 years and of those who have left a post, half would never work in this area again. His research and also that by Wazir, (1999) identify some of the reasons behind this statistic. Many employees can suffer with stress from the day-to-day workings due to the amount of calls that are being taken, to the excessive monitoring of time between calls, length of calls and breaks. There are also those employees who have been told they have been selected due to their individuality or personality only to find that they are required to conform by the universal following of scripts. Frontline staff also have to deal with

abusive callers, and their evidence suggests that in some call centres employees are not given the opportunity to talk through stressful situations due to the need to answer the next call to alleviate queues.

Physical problems that have been identified by Unions and the Health and Safety Executive relate to the nature of the job. These include the problems associated with hot-desking where frontline staff move between different terminals which can mean the readjusting of equipment and furniture to avoid musculo-skeletal damage. This is illustrated by Wazir, (1999) who used participant observation to assess the working conditions of one call centre receiving calls for a large mobile phone company. He states 'the telephone operators have no fixed desks, there is a daily scramble for the latest computers'. There are also problems associated with using headsets for extended periods of time. Any substandard equipment can lead to hearing problems. (Boggan, 2001; Saunders, 2001).

Reputable call centres place an emphasis on continued training after the initial introductory sessions. This has the benefit of providing workers with the knowledge in order to multi-task, therefore broadening the range of skills a worker has, which leads to greater variety of day-to-day jobs. This may even involve tasks away from the telephone and therefore can break up the day and reduce boredom. Manday, (cited in Williams, 2000) states: 'An increasing number of centres now have learning rooms where staff go of their own volition. This not only makes them feel recognised but means they can handle a wider variety of calls.'

The situation of disparity that exists has largely come about due to a lack of regulation and universal standards throughout the industry. This has been partly due to present regulators not accounting for the responsibility of investigating call centres (Which?, 2003).

2.1.1 Customer service

Service quality can vary across the call centre industry, however the majority of individuals are most likely to come across newspaper articles that illustrate the negative aspects of call centres (Eberhardt & Solomons, 2003; Goodchild, 2003; Akbar, 2002). However Brown & Maxwell (2002) argue, 'Customers' perceptions of the service they receive is, arguably, the basis of success for call centre.'

A recent report published in July 2003 by Which? investigated customer opinions on call centres from 600 adults who had used a call centre within the last year. They found that the most common complaint was being kept on hold for long periods of time (64%). The survey also considered the opinions of what people wanted from a call centre when they used one. Sixty percent of respondents valued contact with a real person rather than an automated service. A quarter of the respondents had been annoyed by music whilst queuing. Other factors that interviewees felt to be important were giving estimated waiting times and indication of their position in a queue. Recommendations from the report focused on a need for more information for callers who are placed in queuing systems and compulsory monitoring of the industry.

A larger survey conducted by market analysts Mintel surveyed 2,020 individuals with similar results (cited in Akbar, 2002). Ninety percent of respondents were unhappy

with the services provided by call centres, with once again the most frustrating issue being kept “on hold” for lengthy periods of time (60%). The research also found that only 5% were completely satisfied with the services they had received from call centres.

2.2 Public sector call centres

Public sector call centres are primarily set up in order to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as a means to reduce costs. This is especially true in local government where having a central point of contact for telephone users can reduce the need for calls to be passed on to different departments. This is best explained in a quote by one head of e-government:

‘The aim is to improve customer satisfaction. We will not be taking up the those practices which have been adopted in some commercial call centres that are designed solely to cut costs, but are almost universally criticised by their users.’ (Kirk, 2003)

Call centres are also being considered as an option by authorities due to government legislation regarding access to council information by electronic formats (including the telephone). This means that many authorities now have e-government departments, whose aims are to reach the government targets before 2008.

From a management point of view public sector call centres allow for greater efficiency of resources within departments as less expensive staff can be supported

by IT systems to deal with customers' queries, while more skilled staff can be redeployed to concentrate on more complex work (NAO, 2002:3). In the London Borough of Brent, the technology that is used in the call centre enables managers to provide a mixture of workers with differing skills. Some staff are trained to deal with all department calls, whilst others concentrate on a single line of enquiry. The technology allows for calls to be routed to the most relevant operator (Buckley, 2001). The call centre works alongside a fleet of One Stop Shops for council services in order to provide a comparable level of service quality between face-to-face and telephone users.

However a major problem with creating seamless access across all council departments centres on technology. Compatibility between differing systems can result in fewer tasks that call centre staff can complete, reducing efficiency. This is especially true in authorities where finances are finely balanced. Milner (2000) argues this is due to piecemeal changes over time:

'Such a position has arisen mainly because little attention has historically been paid to ensuring that ICT purchasing decisions within public services should be made, at least partly, upon the basis of ensuring compatibility with other systems running in related areas of the government.'

The National Audit Office compiled a comprehensive survey of using call centres to deliver public services, in 2002. A selection of key findings from the report identified that 60% of respondents (from a sample of 2,000) were willing to use call centres to enquire about services from departments. Of the 40% who were not willing, the main reason was a preference to talking to someone in person (17%). With regards to working conditions, the inspectors found that conditions were of an acceptable

standard: 'Staff worked in a reasonable physical environment, could take regular breaks and remuneration was comparable with call centres in the private sector.'

Research by some individual councils has also illustrated that public sector call centres can be an asset to overall service delivery. Research by Surrey County council found that 80% of residents were using the telephone as the mode of contact with the council. As a result a call centre was established to take away this level of calling from frontline staff in order to benefit face-to-face dealings. Findings from the call centre have indicated a 90% satisfaction level with users rating the service provided by the call centre as either "very good" or "good", with clearly explained information and polite staff being major assets (Wright, 1999).

In research conducted before the installation of their call centre, Hertfordshire County Council discovered worrying telephone service trends. Saeber (1999) writes, 'on average every call was handled at least twice in the organisation and sometimes four or five times.' They also asked the public for their feedback on telephone access and found that the majority of complaints were linked to this problem. After the commencement of the call centre data showed that 70% of calls were dealt with at the first point of contact and needed no referral to specialist departments (Saeber, 1999).

More recent call centres are now seen under the title of "contact centres". This is in recognition of the variety of jobs that are undertaken as well as answering telephone enquiries. This can include e-mail and online enquiries, in addition to faxed and written correspondence (Buckley, 2001). Also from a cynical point of view it may be seen as tactic to remove the term "call centre" due to the poor press that private sector organisations have received in the past. It is acknowledged by the author that

this is now the more acceptable term but for the sake of uniformity the study will continue to refer to them as “call centres”.

2.3 The role of the library service

There has been an overall lack of research as to the affect a local authority call centre has on the library service (if indeed it decides to include the library service in the first place). This may be due to short length of time call centres have been adopted by local government and even the concentration on the Peoples’ Network (PN) which has occupied many library related column inches over recent years. Interestingly though it is the introduction of the PN that has lead many authorities to feel that taking routine enquiries away from frontline library staff can enable a greater amount of training and advice to members of the public in that area. Libraries can only cope with so many resources, therefore in some cases the transfer of calls to a call centre can enable quality to be maintained throughout the overall service (Kirk, 2003).

In the few studies which have looked at the library and call centre relationship, all have commented on the problems of staff having to serve both face-to-face and phone enquirers simultaneously (Milner, 1997; Coffman, 1999). Milner (1997) first identified the possible benefits to service quality long before the growth in local government call centres. These are identified as ‘increased organisational efficiency and improved levels of customer satisfaction.’ However her vision concentrated on the possibility of an integrated multi-authority ‘renewal and reservation centres’ working in partnership, rather than the library service being incorporated into a local

government call centre. However the underlining point of diverting calls away from library staff is still valid, although Milner may now have concern with regards to the level of customer satisfaction and service quality from operators who may never have had any experience of working in a library environment before.

Coffman (1999) also comments on the increased organisational efficiency a call centre could bring to a library service. In his focus on dealing with reference enquires in America, he argues that call centre technologies enable work to be evenly distributed 'avoiding the "feast and famine" phenomenon so characteristic of reference desks.' He also stresses technical advantages, where call centres can keep records of all questions asked and answers given 'so staff don't have to reinvent the wheel every time they get the same question'. However perhaps his most controversial viewpoint focuses on the overall realigning of reference services with fewer professionals in branches:

'Perhaps it is time to move our professional staff off the library floors and into a centralised reference call center carefully designed to help them answer questions accurately, quickly, and inexpensively.'

Research by Milner, Kinnell & Usherwood (1997:158) found that a general consensus emerged between managers who felt that it was generally 'better to direct employees always to deal with the library user in the building before the telephone enquirer.' However they also found evidence that their case study authorities were investigating available technology to divert calls away from the frontline staff to deal with more basic enquiries.

Chapter 3 Methodology and Methods of Investigation

3.0 Methodology

A decision was reached early on in the planning of this dissertation that due to a lack of previous research being available to aid this study, the overall methodology would be based on the inductive approach. It is essentially a theory building method, also known as 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, cited in May, 2001:31). This approach uses the results from the original research questions to determine any thoughts and theories after the data has been collected. This form of research lends itself well to exploratory research as Golding (cited in Denscombe, 2003:113) explains, 'Usually researchers adopt grounded theory when the topic of interest has been relatively ignored in the literature or has been given only superficial attention.' In other words there is no pre-selected hypothesis that is being tested throughout the research. This form of theory building entails asking whether the observation is a particular case of a more general factor, or how the observation fits into a pattern or a story (de Vaus, 2001:6).

The primary data consists of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data that is produced from both questionnaires and interviews. This mixed method approach or triangulation of methods has gained in popularity since Denzin first applied the term triangulation to mixed method research, published in 1978. Tashakkori & Teddlie (1998:41), in their summary of the development of mixed method approaches write:

'The concept of the triangulation of methods was the intellectual wedge that eventually broke the methodological hegemony of the monomethod purists.'

Therefore a mixed method approach can allow a wide range of data collection that not only provides factual content in the form of statistics, but also in-depth opinion. Both methods have their disadvantages but as Brewer and Hunter (cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998:40) write,

'Our individual methods may be flawed, but fortunately the flaws are not identical. A diversity of imperfection allows us to combine methods...to compensate for their particular faults and imperfections.'

Quantitative methods allow for more direct comparisons to be made as the data can be manipulated into a variety of patterns and statistical analysis such as cross-tabulation or frequency charts. This method is often necessary as a way of effectively illustrating trends and other findings in the clearest and easiest way for others to interpret. Mann (in Slater, ed, 1990:46) identifies two main reasons for using quantitative methods in research, these are: to identify any trends or in order to make any comparisons. It is a method that is used heavily in the "library world" seen most often in the form of item issue statistics and numbers of visits to libraries.

Qualitative data on the other hand aims to explore deeper into respondents' thoughts and theories. Qualitative research 'considers the subjective meanings that people bring to their situation.' (de Vaus, 2001) It also allows respondents to express their opinions without being stifled or influenced by the researcher. However open results are more difficult to statistically test and analyse. This form of data collection is less of a "quick-fix" method, often meaning that it cannot be graphed or tabulated and usually discussion is the most common form of presentation. Therefore in order for qualitative data to be as effective as quantitative, Slater (1990)

writes, 'this calls for sensitive interpretation of information collected and creative presentational skills in order to communicate findings.'

3.1 Methods of Investigation

3.1.1 Literature Review

Secondary sources provide the background to understanding the results that are obtained from primary data collection. Hart (1998:13), defines a literature review as 'the selection of available documents...to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated...' For this study there was an adequate supply of articles and documents on call centres and service quality, however at the time of collection there was little readily available material related to the effects on public libraries. Journal articles were obtained by using searches in a variety of gateways. These included databases such as Emerald and Elsevier Science and bibliographic databases such as LISA, which is accessed through the University of Sheffield Star catalogue provided by Webspirs. Using the 'Google' search engine and typing in various related queries have also accessed certain data.

Books on managing information in the public sector and customer service delivery have also been searched for, as well as texts that focus on research design in both the public library and the University of Sheffield Star catalogue by using author/title and keyword searches. Other data has come from local newspaper reports in an

area where a call centre has been proposed and national newspaper online databases.

3.1.2 Questionnaire survey

The primary aims of the questionnaire design were to be easy to understand and inviting enough to make the respondents want to express their opinions as fully as possible. This was of particular importance as the questionnaire was essentially catering for three differing stances on call centres. Therefore the questionnaire was split into three sections with simple instructions in an opening statement and at the filter question (see appendix 1). It was decided to use a single questionnaire as opposed to three individuals due to the nature of the mode of delivery; sending three separate attachments in one e-mail would have lead to confusion and ultimately a poor response rate.

The use of a semi-structured questionnaire with a mix of open and closed questioning was designed so that it was not too lengthy to lessen the possibility of the respondent becoming bored or feeling “bogged down”, or too loaded with quantitative questions to make the individual feel their opinions are being stifled. The e-mail method of investigation is discussed in more detail below.

3.1.3 Pilot study

In order to establish the effectiveness of the e-mail questionnaire (this being especially purposeful due to the researcher not being present to guide the

respondent through the questionnaire) a pilot test enabled the questions to be assessed by experienced questionnaire testers from a library authority and an academic member of staff. Pilot studies remove problems associated with clarity, understanding and order of questions (Burton, in Slater, ed, 1990). As well as examining each question individually, the questionnaire as a whole also needs attention in order to check that questions flow together and are in the correct order (de Vaus, 1991).

The resulting issues that surfaced from the pilot included problems relating to the phrasing of questions and getting the right balance of quantitative and qualitative questioning. The first problem of phrasing questions was amended by rewording questions that were felt could lead respondents into answering a question in a way the researcher expected them to. These questions were made more generic. The second main problem relating to balance of questioning type was highlighted by the testers who thought certain questions would produce results that could be analysed more accurately if they were changed to quantitative questions. This had the effect of producing a questionnaire that was more in tune with the overall mixed methodology approach.

3.1.4 E-mail questionnaires

Recent research has begun to identify the benefits of using electronic mail to deliver questionnaires as an alternative to postal mail (Mehta & Sivadas, 1995; Roselle & Neufeld, 1998; Sheehan & McMillan, 1999; Ilieva et al, 2002). In their research, the above authors all identified the immediate benefits from using e-mail as a method of questionnaire distribution, these being quick responses and cost savings. Mehta & Sivadas, (1995) write 'clearly, e-mail surveys were much quicker and much less

expensive. Majority of e-mail responses are received in two or three days compared with three weeks for mail responses.' In research where the amount of available time is limited, such as this dissertation, it was decided this was the best method to take. This was also aided by the knowledge that the vast majority of all local government authorities have e-mail access and are familiar with communicating by this means. E-mail technology also enables employers to send out automatic responses to senders to say whether they are "out of the office" and when they will be due back.

However, as with all methods of data collection there are some negative points to using e-mail surveys. Although response times are much quicker in general, Mehta & Sivadas (1995) point out that although it may be quicker to send out e-mails than letters there is no guarantee that e-mail account holders will check their inbox daily. It is also for some people, easier to complete questions using pen and paper by circling numbers than using a keyboard (Mehtas & Sivadas, 1995). The main concern with regards to this study centred on the specialised nature of the topic. The mailing list did not consist of those who necessarily had a good knowledge of call centres; therefore it may have required some passing around before it reached the most relevant person. This would obviously affect the response rate. There can also be a number of technical issues that can have an effect on response rates (which are discussed below).

A mailing list of 167 library authorities in England and Wales (including the Isle of Man) was used to distribute the questionnaire. A mailing list is a more practical way of sending information to a large survey sample rather than sending an individual e-mail to each authority. However this can generate some problems. In their study, Sheehan & McMillan, (1999) found that some respondents clicked on the "reply to all" option, which sent a copy to all recipients on the mailing list. This can lead to

confidentiality issues. Fortunately, the researcher is not aware of it occurring in this study.

It was decided to use the attached method of sending the questionnaire rather than an embedded version. This was due to the ease of producing the questionnaire in a familiar and also visibly more attractive program (Microsoft Word) and the ability for respondents to printout the questionnaire if necessary.

Research by Dommeyer & Moriarty (2000) comparing attached and embedded methods of questionnaire presentation found that there were no differences between the 'response speed' and 'number of item omissions' but they did find that the embedded questionnaire gave a higher response rate. However they argue embedded questionnaires 'limit the researcher's ability to formulate sophisticated questionnaires.' A number of options are not available such as using bold text, colour, different sized text and graphics (Dommeyer & Moriarity, 2000). Using attachments can also provide the researcher with some weaknesses not apparent with embedded questionnaires that can affect response rates. These can include the increased complexity due to more stages to complete in order to send the e-mail successfully, the assumption that the person knows how to deal with attachments and whether it is corporate policy to open e-mails from unknown sources (Dommeyer & Moriarity, 2000). From this dissertation only one problem was encountered, an attachment not returned correctly by an authority. This was remedied by an e-mail about the problem to the respondent. With regards to attachments from unknown sources, an e-mail warning authorities of a future questionnaire survey was sent by an academic staff member of the Information Studies department.

In total 59 responses were returned from the 167 questionnaire sent, giving a response rate of 35%. Saunders et al, in Ilieva et al (2002) consider a 30% response rate to be a 'reasonable' size return for this type of survey. Thirty-seven (64%) of the responses were returned within the first week, highlighting the time benefits of this method. The good response rate therefore justifies the methods used for the design and application of the e-mail questionnaire. Receivers of the e-mail questionnaire were also given the option of printing off the questionnaire and sending it back as a hard copy in the post. Sheeham and McMillian (1999) argue that this benefits those who 'might not feel comfortable with the process of completing the survey via e-mail.' It also means that those respondents who may be having technical problems can still send their responses. Of the 59 responses, six authorities opted to use this method.

Of the 167 questionnaires that were sent out to library authorities on the mailing list, seven were returned as undelivered. This may have been due to server problems, a change of e-mail address or in the case where an e-mail was sent to a particular member of staff, a change of job. In order not to exclude these authorities alternative e-mail addresses were found on each of their websites. From these seven authorities this resulted in a pleasing four responses.

3.1.5 Case Studies

It was felt important to illustrate in greater detail some of the finer details and opinions to the extent call centres have affected some of the library authorities in the survey. Denscombe (2003:30) writes 'there may be many insights to be gained from looking at the individual case'. In order to do this it was decided to use three

authorities as case studies, each one representing libraries at the three identified stages for dealing with call centres as stated in “question 2” of the e-mail questionnaire (i.e. those who have call centres, those who have them proposed and those who are not planning to use them).

The case studies were chosen randomly from those respondents who agreed to be contacted at a later date for a more in-depth look at their service. It is acknowledged that this method of research can be seen as generalising the results of each category and in a sense this is true as certain elements will be similar due to current e-government policy, but it is hoped that those who read this study can learn from these more detailed insights.

3.1.6 Semi-structured interviews (in person and telephone)

Three semi-structured interviews were carried out during the research, one from each case study authority. One of these was conducted in informal surroundings face-to-face, whilst the other two interviews were carried out as telephone interviews. This was due to costs and lack of available time to meet interviewees in person. An interview schedule was constructed for each occasion, which included all the main points that the researcher aimed to cover.

A semi-structured interview was considered the better choice over a completely structured one. It was felt that it enabled the flow of conversation to be kept at a steady pace, rather than the researcher forcing the interviewee to keep to a rigid order of questions. It was also considered to be a more polite method and one that

allows the interviewee to build on their ideas and speak more widely on issues (Denscombe, 2003:167).

3.1.7 Unstructured interviews with library assistants

It was considered important to gain the thoughts and opinions from frontline staff, as well as those in management, gained from the e-mail questionnaire. Therefore small unstructured and informal interviews were constructed with 10 library assistants from one of the case study authorities. Opinions from Interviewees were sought in two specific areas, but that was the limit of any structuring, individuals were free to raise any points that they felt were relevant.

The library assistants in this survey were all known to the researcher prior to the dissertation. This it is felt was an advantage due to the interviewees knowing the researcher and therefore they had the knowledge that the researcher could understand their concerns more fully due to past experience in that area. It may have also made the sample feel more comfortable talking to a recognised face. However it is acknowledged that knowing the sample personally can introduce a number of problems unknowingly, such as interviewer bias and the danger of the researcher interpreting their reactions more strongly than the interviewee really thinks them. It is felt that the positives outweigh the negative aspects and the information provided from this method still holds a degree of validity.

It should be noted that a more representative sample was just not possible in a survey of this nature with limited time and resources. The opinions from this method therefore must act as a guide to the emotions and concerns of the library assistants

towards the introduction of call centres in that particular authority. It is however, thought that these views still hold relevance and the results suggest other library assistants in similar circumstances may raise these issues nationally.

3.2 Limitations and weaknesses of study

No research project is without its flaws and weaknesses. However, providing the researcher is aware of such problems it can show an overall grasp of the subject area. Certain weaknesses have been identified in particular to this study in addition to those more general research method related problems commented on earlier in this chapter.

The email questionnaire produced a pleasing response rate on the whole, but also certain frustrations. It was known by the researcher that certain authorities had call centres in operation, but despite a repeat e-mail to these authorities there was still no feedback. This could have provided more depth and knowledge to the overall understanding of operational call centres. A similar e-mail problem that may have been a factor in this study was the specialised nature of the research topic. Even though “no call centre” responses were actively encouraged, certain potential respondents may have felt embarrassed or awkward returning a questionnaire with little or no detail. These may be weaknesses of the e-mail method in general due to the risk of using mailing lists rather than uncooperative authorities.

An area that is missing from this research is the opinions from members of the public on call centres; information about which has only been gained from second hand from those authorities completing the questionnaire. It was decided that due to time constraints and difficulty in deciding on a representative sample, that the

researcher could not do this area justice. Opinions may be different nationally depending on the level of telephone service quality in libraries and whether an authority operates a call centre. A feel of current public opinion towards call centres in the public sector can be offered by more general recent research (National Audit Office, 2002). Further research with a focus on customer opinion on local government call centres serving libraries could be an area to extend this research.

Chapter 4 Results and Data Analysis

4.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the findings from the research in a way which best illustrates the original objectives, therefore the objectives identified in chapter 1 will be dealt with in turn, using the results from each method of collection. The results will be analysed after all findings have been described from each section.

Authorities have been made anonymous due the problems that can be encountered, such as misinterpretation of ideas and opinion. As a result the three case studies representing each questionnaire classification for call centre status (yes, planned and no) will be known as Authority A, B and C respectively.

4.1 Establishing the importance of call centres within public library services

This section will concentrate on the findings that best represent the issues raised in the first objective. This includes how both library and call centre will function together, why call centres have been chosen by some authorities and not considered by others and the benefits the public should experience.

4.1.1 Results from the E-mail questionnaire

Quantitative results

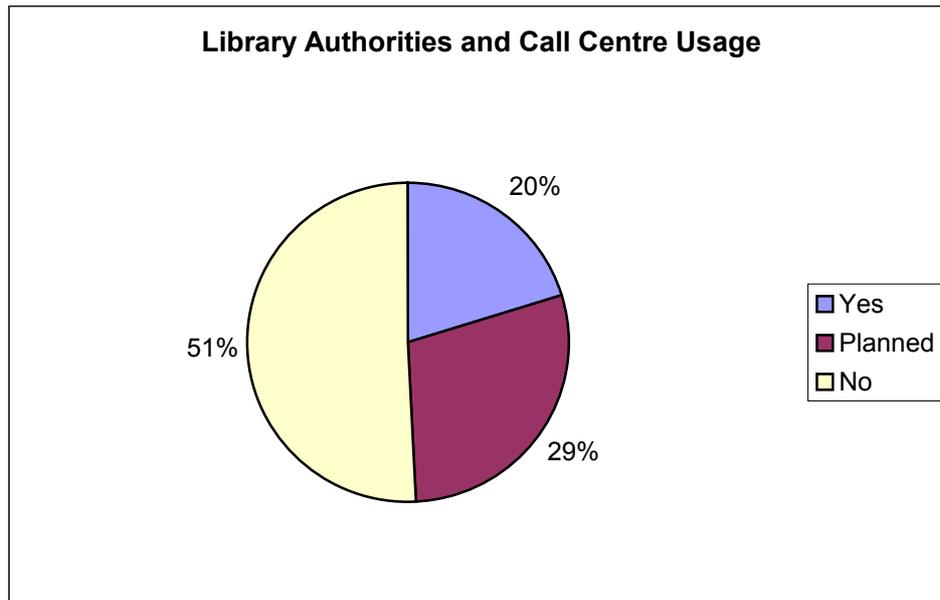


Figure 4.1

The findings from the opening question of the e-mail survey are illustrated in Figure 4.1. It shows the current situation for the 59 authorities that returned the questionnaire, regarding call centre uptake. The greatest amount of responses were returned in the “no” category (30 respondents or 51%). The second highest return was from authorities that are planning call centres (17 respondents or 33%), followed by the “yes” category with 12 responses or 17%. However if the results are combined from the “planned” and “yes” categories the percentage increases to 49%, meaning that in the near future almost fifty percent of authorities from the question will have call centres catering for many local government services including library users.

Time Period	Number	Percentage
1 year or less	5	41.7
1-2 years	2	16.7
2-3 years	2	16.7
3-4 years	3	25.0
4-5 years	0	0
5 years or more	0	0
Total	12	100

Table 4.1 Number of years call centres have been operational

It was deemed important to provide a question that aimed to find out how many years those authorities with call centres had been in operation. Table 4.1 shows 5 of the 12 authorities (42%) have only been in use for under a year. However, three have been operational for between 3-4 years. None of the surveyed authorities have had call centres for more than four years, suggesting how this is recent service provided by councils. The following data provided in Table 4.2 illustrates the common number of staff who work in call centres that provide a service for library users. From the eleven authorities who provided information on this question, nine (82%) have between 1 and 20 employees. No authorities have more than 60 staff within their call centres.

Category	Number	Percentage
0-20	9	82
21-40	1	9
41-60	1	9
61-80	0	0
81-100	0	0
100+	0	0
Total	11	100

Table 4.2 Number of staff employed in surveyed call centres

Authority	Renewals	Ref Enquires	Item Enquiries	Item Reserve	Account Enquiries	Account Payments	Children's Enquiries	Computer Bookings	General Enquiries	Other	Total
1	X			X			X	X	X		5
2	X		X						X		3
3	X										1
4		X						X	X		3
5	X		X	X	X				X		5
6									X		1
7	X	X	X						X		4
8							X		X	X	3
9	X								X		2
10									X		1
11	X	X	X	X			X		X		6
12	X		X	X			X		X		5
Total	8	3	5	4	1	0	4	2	11	1	

Table 4.3 Tasks performed by call centres

Table 4.3 displays the results from an email question asking respondents to identify the library related functions their call centre is able to carry out. The table shows clearly the majority of call centres are equipped to deal with answering general enquiries for the library service (11 out of 12 authorities). Another popular task that operators are trained to deal with are item renewals in 8 of the 12 authorities. The remainder of the tasks are performed by under half of the respondents, with no authorities offering the option of account payment during a call. Interestingly, three respondents state they provide reference enquiries from their call centres. When looking at the rows horizontally, the greatest amount of tasks that a call centre provides for library users is 6, with the average from all twelve authorities being 3 tasks. However three call centres only cater for one library enquiry each.

Authority	Renewals	Ref Enquiries	Item Enquiries	Item Reserve	Account Enquiries	Account Payments	Children's Enquiries	Computer Bookings	General Enquiries	Other	Total
1	X		X	X	X	X		X	X		7
2									X		1
3	X									X	2
4	X			X	X	X	X		X		6
5					X		X		X		3
6	X				X	X			X		4
7	X								X		2
8	X										1
9									X		2
10									X	X	2
Total	6	0	1	2	4	3	3	1	8	2	

Table 4.4 Planned call centre authorities – potential services to be offered

Table 4.4 provides information on the same set of options from a question put to authorities that at the time of the questionnaire were planning to have a call centre offering library related enquiries. Again, very similar results were produced with 8 out of 10 authorities reporting that they could offer a service for general enquiries. The second most popular task was item renewals with 6 out of 10 responses. No authorities stated that they would be answering reference enquiries, but three wrote that they would be offering account payment over the telephone. When looking at the number of tasks authorities are looking to perform, the highest responses are seven and eight enquiries, with the average being three tasks. Two authorities may possibly be only offering one enquiry each when their call centres open.

Category	Public Opinion	Overall Efficiency
Very positive	1	2
Positive	6	6
Indifferent	3	2
Negative	0	0
Very Negative	0	0
Total	10	10

Table 4.5 Planned call centre authorities – perceived impacts

Authorities with planned call centres were asked to give their opinion on how the new facility will have an impact on both public opinion and efficiency of the service. The results are shown in Table 4.5. The table shows most respondents (7 out of 10) feel public opinion will be either very positive or positive towards the call centres when they open. A similar high number (8 out of 10) report the opening of the call centre will have positive outcomes towards the efficiency of their library service. No authorities feel there will be any overall negatives towards the introduction of the service in either of the two areas.

Qualitative results

Authorities with call centres and those who had them planned were both requested to list the three core reasons for the decision to use such a service. From analysis of the responses it is clear there are three issues that are paramount in deciding the installation of a call centre. These have been identified as efficiency, access and providing a better service. Many authorities site reasons linked with becoming more efficient, such as cost and service delivery, the latter by centralising enquiries or

from a library perspective devoting more time for face-to-face contact without telephone disruption. Most authorities also cited improved access as a factor, which is also high on the e-government agenda for local councils. The other popular reason was that the provision of a call centre in order to provide a better service for the customer. Other points raised included greater consistency of information, better links across departments and ability to monitor calls in order to evaluate service quality.

Library authorities with call centres were asked to comment on the benefits that have occurred since the opening of their call centre. Many of the replies centred on the improvements in customer care for face-to-face users that are now possible due to the reduction in telephone calls. Other comments focused on the improvements telephone users now have such as a short waiting time to be served and lines being open for longer hours due to being operational outside normal library hours.

Respondent's comments

'Less time spent on basic calls - more time spent with customers at the library enquiry desk'

'Reduced the number of basic "simple" calls that each library receives – frees up staff time and reduced noise pollution'

'Vast majority of customers now have their calls answered / acknowledged in a short period of time'

'People who might not have contacted the library service are doing so via the call centre'

'Less pressure due to constant phone calls at peak periods particularly at the central library'

'None so far'

The same authorities were also asked to comment on the feedback they have received from members of the public in order to view users' opinions on using a call centre to perform traditional library specific tasks. It appears that in general there has been little reaction to the introduction of call centres. Three of the authorities out of the ten who answered the question revealed that there has been little feedback due to any public announcement being made that users are speaking to call centre staff, therefore the customer thinks they are telephoning their local library. The few cases of negative feedback staff have encountered includes common call centre problems such as being put on hold for too long, too many transfers and concern about the quality of answers and knowledge of call centre staff. Positive feedback from one authority has focused on the improved access for users who have traditionally been unable to visit a static library, 'enabled disabled to access a quality service for first time'.

Responses from the "no authorities"

As illustrated above in Figure 4.1 the highest number of responses for the question asking for the status within authorities regarding call centres fell into the two "no" categories, these being for authorities that have no current plans for a call centre or those who have considered and then subsequently rejected the implementation of such a scheme. For those councils who provided a reason for this, a common theme for the lack of uptake was due to the set-up costs, often commonly linked to the size of the local population and whether it would be financially viable. Other authorities gave examples of library services they have in place which provide similar functions such as 24-hour renewals lines, information lines and one-stop shops (see case study C). One authority noted that the council had a call centre, but the library service had not been included as one of the departments operators deal with. It was

interesting to note that none of the respondents reported that a call centre was not on an agenda due to a dislike of such a service. Therefore it is realistic to think that some of these authorities may have a call centre in some form within the next five years, if the popularity and growth of such a services increases, as mentioned in chapter 2. An overview is now provided illustrating some of the opinions made by respondents.

'Rejected due to cost...this reflects the limited size of our network'

'As a very small library authority, we would have to be sure that it would make sense for us to do so'

'Costs too high for a small, poor under funded rural authority'

'No, with limited resources other developments have higher priority'

'There are no firm plans because the corporate policy is to operate a people centred enquiry service (but) diverting book renewals and opening hour enquiries would save significant amounts of staff time'

'It is not high on any library agenda...were the council to go that route I suspect we wouldn't be dragged kicking and screaming'

'We have recently put in a 24-hour telephone renewal and information line which went live in June'

4.1.2 Results from case study authorities

Authority A

In common with many authorities, the established call centre in "authority A" was in response to modernising government agenda of the late 1990s requiring the expansion of electronic access methods to local government information. The call

centre within this authority went live earlier in 2003 prior to which a separate library call centre had operated from 1999 for part of the authority, but was then superseded by the current set-up. It was reported that since opening, the call centre has reduced the amount of calls abandoned to 4%. Prior to introduction the library call centre had an abandon rate of around 8%. The previous call centre for library users was a small-scale operation situated in the authority's central library and was staffed at peak times by two library assistants. This was reduced to one between 5pm and 7pm. There were no dedicated operators, instead staffing was rotated between assistants who answered calls for all departments in the central library plus two other town libraries. The original plan was to develop and provide a library contact centre for the whole county, however the local council decided to introduce a countywide "contact centre" which now takes almost all library enquiries.

Disappointingly, it was revealed that none of the library assistants who had experience of working in the previous call centre transferred to the new facilities; therefore none of the present operators have any experience of working in a library environment. Concern was expressed towards this arrangement by the researcher, as it appeared that service quality could suffer as a result of this situation. An example was given of library staff knowing the behaviour of their users and the computer system more thoroughly and therefore being in a better position to identify potential problems. The representative acknowledged this was an issue with the following statement:

"One thing you can't replace is local knowledge...but the benefits outweigh the costs."

Benefits have enabled better overall service quality for telephone users such as the average time a call is answered within, which is now 10 seconds, currently half the

county council standard. The call centre offers the following services to users: renewals, reference enquiries, item enquiries, item reservations, information on children's services and general enquiries. The level of service was justified by the representative in the following statement, 'we are paying for the service so it is in our interests to get the most out of it!'

It was also revealed that the library service is trying to "push" online renewals so not to congest the county call centre (which is already taking around 9,000 library calls a month), figures for online renewals are currently equivalent to issues in a small branch library. In response to this, a point was raised on the subject of popularity and the continual development of the overall call centre service, as it would be expected that departments would expand the amount of queries operators were able to answer. Would this in fact have an opposite effect and lower service quality? The library representative made the following point:

"It's true, there is a danger we could become victims of our own successes...but this way is better."

The library service has been experiencing some minor problems since the introduction of the call centre, mainly with call transfers by the operators. These have included unnecessary transferring of enquiries and not transferring some queries that are beyond the call centre remit. There have also been some complaints from users about not being able to telephone their local library without having to be transferred by the call centre, as well as complaints about being put on hold and the level of service they have received. However it was argued that complaints have been low overall, 'given the contact centre has handled over 18,000 (library related) calls in the past two months, I think the level of complaints has been very low.'

Authority B

It was revealed that the overall reason for the authority to decide on call centre (to be known as a contact centre) was primarily to improve the telephone contact to council services for the public. This was based on research by the authority that stated on average 11% of calls are abandoned under current system and in some departments this is as high as 30%. The representative from the e-government department described the outline of the scheme as follows:

'The main aim is to get an effective phone service rather than saving money, although it would be nice to save money.'

Research for the authority has also shown that the library service receives the most calls of all service departments (460,000 in 2001) therefore the call centre will impact to a noticeable extent on the library employees. The aim is to improve access by offering longer hours of staffing than in the average library, with the possibility of 24 hour staffing. It was thought necessary to enquire into how much involvement and consultation had been made with library management, in order to find out how much interest there was in involving the library service with the scheme. It was reported that call centre officials had visited each council department to see which would benefit from such a service. In total it was discovered that the call centre could cater for 93 individual enquiries from all services (15 of which from the library service). The majority of these library based enquiries were essentially all those that users are able to execute on the county website, such as item renewals and information on opening times. It has yet to be decided on whether to stop publishing existing individual library numbers, this can prove unpopular with users if all initial contact with libraries is abandoned.

The role of the public library is to be reinforced by the introduction of the call centre and literature from the authority has described the library service as 'the ideal partner.' The library has been integrated into the overall aim of improving access by developing links with face-to-face service. The view from the call centre organisers is that the chain of libraries will act as points where help can be given with a range of council services, such as 'reporting if a streetlight is out' or help with filling in forms. The ability to perform this would be due to the "freeing up" of staff time from the removal of telephone interruptions. Librarians will still deal with complex reference questions and call centre staff will transfer these calls to selected larger libraries.

Authority C

This case study authority has been included to provide a contrast for the reader with a brief look at another method of expanding access to council services as part of government targets, the development of one-stop shops. The spokeswoman for the council explained the authority's desire to expand the provision of one-stop shops providing an alternative environment to access information. The plan is for five one-stop shops to be established in the authority, with the first having opened at the beginning of the year. A call centre is being considered as a possibility, but there are no firm plans as to when it will be established.

The one-stop shop facility is equipped to deal with 80% of all council services. The role for library users is similar to a normal library; it provides a full service (such as the ability for users to return items, enquire about their account and also for new members to join) apart from the actual library stock. The aim from a library point of view is to provide a service parallel to the present library service, as the one-stop

shop is open longer hours than the surrounding libraries and can therefore benefit those who cannot access their library during the normal opening hours. This is especially true during the morning as it open around an hour earlier, benefiting workers. One area that the one-stop shop does not cater for is telephone contact. Telephone calls are deliberately discouraged as the service is aimed at being face-to-face. It was therefore clear to the researcher that a call centre may still be needed in order to improve telephone contact to libraries, and how would this affect the development of the one-stop shop idea. Could they both exist together?

The researcher was informed that as the one-stop shop and the call centre would be managed by the same department so it was unlikely that there would be any conflict. However there still would be both competing for funding. It was also identified that both services would not be competing for the same users and that they could coexist together, 'there is a difference between those who prefer face-to-face and the telephone.' The London Borough of Brent was cited as prime example of a call centre and a fleet of one-stop shops having existed together for many years.

4.1.3 Discussion

It is interesting to note the potential increase to the number of council call centres that is suggested by the figure 49% (29 of the authorities) will have call centres in the coming few years. This is inline with trends in growth identified by the National Audit Office report published in 2002. Reasons for this trend have been highlighted, such as government legislation (for the expansion of electronic access to local government) and also the need for some authorities to improve their telephone access to services. The results from the "no" authorities are also interesting to review. This because despite a variety of reasons given for the non-uptake such as cost and size of authorities, no respondents were negative towards the idea in principle, so there is also potential for growth in this area over time. It must also be

noted that over 100 questionnaires were unreturned and therefore assumptions should not be drawn from these results. There could be many reasons for authorities not replying, one being that they may have little interest in a call centre for council and library services, so these non-returns have to be put into consideration.

It appears from the small selection of results that the majority of authorities will be offering as their main library related call centre services both general enquiries and item renewals, which have been identified by authorities as the basic telephone tasks that can deter library staff from offering a quality service to face-to-face users.

4.2 The investigation of management policies within call centres

This section of the results chapter aims to explore the behind the scenes elements of call centres, the management aspects that shape the service ultimately delivered. This includes aspects such as working environment, training and monitoring the service.

4.2.1 Results from the E-mail questionnaire

Quantitative results

Authority	Listening to Calls	Monitoring Calls	Mystery Shopping	Monitoring Complaints	Surveying Callers	Bench-marking	Other	Total
1	X	X	X	X	X	X		6
2			X	X		X		3
3			X	X	X			3
4	X		X	X				3
5	X		X					2
6		X		X				2
7	X		X	X	X			4
8				X				1
9								
10							X	1
11			X		X	X		3
12	X	X	X	X				4
Total	5	3	8	8	4	3	1	

Table 4.6 Methods authorities use to monitor service quality

Table 4.6 gives an overview of the methods different authorities use to monitor the quality of service provided by frontline staff. The data show the joint most popular methods of analysing service quality are by using “mystery shopping” techniques and also monitoring complaints, mentioned by 8 of the 11 authorities who answered this question. The next most popular method is to listen to calls (5 out of 11). By looking at the findings horizontally along the rows, it is evident that one authority impressively seems to use all six stated methods to measure service quality. The average number for all respondents is to use three methods

Authority	Recorded Music	Position in Queue	Call Back Option	Other	Total
1					
2					
3				X	1
4	X			X	2
5	X		X		2
6					
7	X		X		2
8					
9					
10				X	1
11	X				2
12	X	X	X		3
Total	5	1	3	3	

Table 4.7 Methods used by call centres to deal with queues

Question 11 of the e-mail questionnaire requested information on how authorities dealt with the common problem of telephone queues to their call centres. The findings, illustrated in table 4.7 show the most used method being recorded music, with 5 of the 7 authorities that chose to answer the question stating this. The next most popular tool was to offer a call back facility if the caller is on hold for too long, with three respondents stating they offered this service. Some authorities also offer a voicemail service and giving the estimated queuing time. The highest number of ways used to manage queues was three by one authority which uses a combination of recorded music, giving users their position in the queue and offering a call back facility to keep their callers best informed. A disappointing five respondents did not complete this question.

Qualitative results

Respondents from authorities with call centres were asked to give a brief explanation as to how the call centre staff are managed in order that their interest is maintained and therefore remaining with the council. This was considered an important question, as staff turnover in the private sector is often very high due to various reasons as commented on in chapter 2. The most popular reason that was returned focused on the actual work that the staff participate in. It appears the variety of enquiries received in a call centre that covers a number of council departments makes the work more interesting and reduces boredom. Other reasons included the variety of shift patterns and wage structures. Two respondents commented that they did not know as the call centre was controlled outside of library service.

Respondent's comments

'They are involved in projects which lead to service development and they know their work is core to the service development – type of work is interesting'

'Staff have their own areas of expertise which are drawn upon to answer enquiries, and their interest is maintained by the breadth and depth of enquiries'

'Many varied shift patterns available'

'Help Desk staff are not library staff, therefore not part of our responsibility'

'Call centre staff – don't know'

Respondents completing the questionnaire for planned call centres were asked a similar question, requesting information on how their authority were planning to manage the staff once the service was operational. The majority of replies centred on the fact that the staff were council employees therefore should expect a good overall working conditions, even for those who will be outsourcing the day-to-day running of the centres. One authority responded that it was in their interest to provide a good working environment if they wanted to provide a high quality service to the public. Other comments included the consultation of trade unions and one authority at the time of the questionnaire was undecided until the results of their pilot study were consulted.

A selection of respondent's comments

'The staff would come under the same terms and conditions as any other Council employee. The management structure has yet to be completed'

'This is a corporate issue as it won't be a stand-alone library call centre. HR are fully involved and unions will be consulted'

'We recognise that disenchanted staff will not be able to present the kind of customer care focus we require. As an IIP accredited organisation we will be looking to create a pleasant and empowering working environment'

'As yet undetermined – pilot (out-sourced) in progress'

4.2.2 Results from case study authorities

Authority A

The call centre is managed as an in-house operation, meaning that it has not been outsourced to a contractor to handle, such as “Authority B” (see below). Staff are given clear guidelines from the library service as to which enquires they are allowed to answer, and have to pass on complex queries to the ‘library back office’. Call centre staff are on a higher wage scale compared to those who have traditionally carried out a similar role in other departments (such as libraries) in order to reduce the problems that are associated with call centres such as high staff turnover. The representative from the library service expressed some concern towards the training of the operators towards library matters. He argued that they had not received enough library training, which at the time of the interview had only been half a day at a library for some of the staff, mainly due to a lack of available training time. This may be one of the reasons for some of the problems that have occurred since the opening of the call centre which have been identified in the previous section of this chapter.

Authority B

The project developers in this authority realise they lack experience in managing call centre staff, therefore the set-up will be contracted out to the firm who best meets the criteria of the council. It would be these contractors who would employ and pay the staff that they feel have the best customer care skills. The management

practises that will be put in place have been decided through research drawn from visits to other call centres in both the private and public sectors. The representative announced both the provisional methods of staff management and training. The call centre operators will be trained to answer calls for a variety of differing departments with wages dependent on the number of enquires the operators are trained to perform. It was ensured by the representative that there would also be good promotional opportunities for workers. Research by the project developers has also revealed that the variety in calls that can be obtained from a council call centre also improves the quality of service for the user as staff are less likely to become bored.

In response to the “sweatshop” label that is commonly fixed to the call centre industry, the interviewee made assurances that this would not be the case in the planned establishment:

“It will not be a sweatshop as the County Council will set the standards, for example there will be no cheap labour.”

The working environment has also been planned to help reduce stress for frontline staff. There will be no time limit for calls so operators will not feel rushed and under pressure, which can be a main cause of stress as illustrated in chapter 2. The call centre technology that will be in use will also benefit both staff and users as it is hoped a system will be in place to give callers who are in a queue information such as estimated waiting time, queue position and the option of leaving their details so staff can call back. This should have the effect of reducing the number of abusive callers that operators will face.

From a library point of view, it is expected that the training for the operators will involve spending some time within library buildings in order to learn the circulation system by librarians and how the library service operates.

4.2.3 Discussion

It appears the authorities that have, or are planning call centres have thoroughly researched the overall management of the service, having identified issues such as job variety, workload handling and training. Staff also have the benefit of working for local government, therefore they should expect a high standard of working conditions and wages. It should also be noted the majority of call centres have less than twenty staff, therefore employees are more likely to work in a friendly environment. For these reasons staff turnover should also be lower, maintaining stability and therefore the standard of service.

Many authorities also have methods in place to evaluate the quality of service such as monitoring complaints, "mystery shopping" techniques and listening to calls. This is similar to research conducted by the National Audit Office (2002), where the most typical methods public sector call centres used monitor quality included listening to calls (71%), monitoring complaints (63%) and mystery shopping (41%). Technology is also in place to monitor issues such as queuing times and abandon rates, as well as offering users who are in a queue information such as length of wait, position in queue and call back facilities. Many of these monitoring tools would not be in place when users telephone their local public library.

A concern from a library point of view is the lack of onsite training that may be offered due to time constraints. A library is an environment rather than just another council department and therefore it may be an advantage from a customer care point of view for call centre operators to experience as much library training as possible. It is debatable whether operators who spend half a day training within a library will be able to provide a general high standard for all library calls.

Another concern was the lack of knowledge a few respondents showed with regard to some of the more detailed aspects of the call centre. Attitudes such as 'Help Desk staff are not library staff, therefore not part of our responsibility' suggest possible instances of library staff seeing their colleagues in the call centre as unrelated to their service (an "us and them" situation). It is acknowledged that some of the questions were quite specific, but it begs the question of whether senior members of library staff should make it their responsibility to know as much as possible about a service which is linked to libraries.

4.3 The impact of call centres on library staff

The final section concentrates on the possible effects the introduction of a call centre can have on the day-to-day tasks library staff have traditionally performed. This section gives opinions from the managers of staff from the e-mail questionnaire, but also opinion from frontline library assistants who perhaps would be more affected by changes in work practices.

4.3.1 Results from the e-mail questionnaire

Quantitative results

Authority	People's Network	Council Enquires	More time Customers	Other	Total
1	X		X	X	3
2					
3			X		1
4				X	1
5					
6			X		1
7	X		X		2
8	X				1
9	X		X		2
10					
11			X		1
12			X		1
Total	4	0	7	2	

Table 4.8 How staff time has been redeployed

A two-part question was put to respondents working for authorities with call centres focusing on whether any job patterns had changed in libraries since the introduction. The first part of the question required details on whether any jobs had been lost in libraries since the advent of each call centre. From the 12 respondents, 10 (83%) reported no job losses, leaving 2 (17%) to write that there had been job losses related to the introduction of a call centre. The second part of the question was

directed to those respondents whose authorities had not experienced any job losses, with the aim of finding out how the staff time freed up by the diverting of calls had changed working practises. The results in table 4.8 show how the libraries in general have been spending the time. It shows 7 of the 9 authorities have redeployed their hours to spend more time with their face-to-face users. Four respondents replied that the time saved answering calls, has been spent with People's Network enquiries. No authorities reported any increase in time dealing with general council enquiries. It is noted that the shaded areas are those authorities who were not applicable to the question or chose not to answer.

Category	Frontline Library Staff
Very positive	0
Positive	4
Indifferent	3
Negative	2
Very Negative	0
Total	9

Table 4.9 Planned call centre authorities – perceived impacts on staff

Table 4.9 shows the expected general reaction from frontline staff towards call centres in those authorities that have such a service planned for the near future. The findings show quite a mix of opinion, with four respondents from the nine who completed the question expecting the majority of staff to be positive towards a call centre. Three authorities feel their staff will be indifferent towards such a service, while two feel the majority of feedback will be negative. However, these figures should be treated with caution due to the small number of respondents.

Qualitative results

A common theme emerged from a question that aimed to establish the core reasons for the setting up of a call centre. This question was included in both the questionnaire for authorities with call centres and those with plans for such facilities. Findings from respondents with a call centre who answered this question showed that eight out of eleven authorities (73%) cited a reason based on removing the pressure on frontline staff. A selection of these comments is provided below. For those authorities planning call centres only 30% of the 10 respondents cited this as one of their three core reasons. However this may be due to the broader answers that were given from these authorities, the depth of the response may depend on each planning stage.

Respondents' comments

'Libraries getting busier and busier, take routine enquiries and phone answering from frontline staff'

'To reduce time front-line staff spend dealing with simple, predictable enquiries'

'Improve the quality of the service delivered by frontline library staff in libraries to personal callers by removing the pressure of ringing phones'

'Release of professional staff'

'Relieve pressure on library staff'

The concerns from library staff that had been encountered by the respondents were sought from the "yes" authorities in order to establish how staff feel the service has changed and how they have been affected. The majority of concerns were service related, mainly on the ability of the call centre staff to provide the same level of

service quality as library staff. Other concerns included uncertainty about existing facilities and job security. The majority of concerns were also echoed in the questionnaire for authorities with planned call centres, although some respondents commented that planning was not significantly advanced to warrant staff feedback. One authority reported that there were no concerns by staff that had been very supportive towards the changes.

Respondents' Comments

'Contact Centre not capable of answering library enquiries to the same standard'

'Reference calls – concerns that the Call Centre do not hand off to library staff “early enough” during the interview for “complex” enquiries'

'Concerns that service will not be as good as presently offered'

'Pay scales differ'

'Potential threat to jobs'

'Affect on First-stop information service which provides local and community info in libraries and a great deal of paper-based info freely given out. Much of this now available at call centre and will impact over time'

'None, staff in branches are really pleased for support, Central staff really pleased that they have some of the straightforward stuff taken away and rest is routed to right person'

A question was put to the authorities planning a call centre, asking how they are preparing their library staff for the introduction of the call centre. Four of the ten authorities that answered this questionnaire felt unable to respond due to the current stage of progression. The remainder of the library services are using a mixture of staff forums, newsletters and meetings to explain how the changes will occur. Other methods include consultation with Trade Unions and making information available on Intranets.

4.3.2 Results from case study authorities

Authority A

The spokesperson from “authority A” identified some of the changes that the library staff have faced and will continue to face since the call centre was opened earlier in the year. It was identified in conversation that many staff have had some of their traditional work replaced due to the opening of the call centre, as there are no longer any individual library telephone numbers published. However this has not been the case in every library as the library call centre that had previously existed had routed calls away from three main libraries beforehand. Therefore, many employees in these libraries may have noticed little impact on their daily patterns (except those who staffed the previous library call centre). There was realisation by the interviewee that some staff may feel some uncertainty towards the future of their jobs due to the changes, but as yet no jobs had been lost due to the introduction of the call centre. It is hoped by the authority that the lessening of telephone interruptions will enable staff to spend more time with their face-to-face users. A reported benefit for staff, which has come from the opening of the call centre is that staff have been ‘freed up from dealing with mundane activities...to concentrate on other things (though) no empirical evidence for this’.

Some library staff have been subject to complaints, it emerged due to the opening of the call centre, due to users being unable to call their local library directly. Other complaints from the public focus on the worry that the authority has put frontline jobs at risk and that users will see fewer faces behind the counters. It was underlined that complaints in general had been low.

Authority B

The representative from authority B was asked three questions from the semi-structured interview based around the impacts the proposed call centre will have on staff in libraries. The overall reaction was that frontline library staff would not be significantly affected by the introduction of call centres. It was reported that library staff should not feel in any danger of losing their jobs 'as answering telephones is only a small part of the job.' This is potentially unlike other council departments where some job restructuring may be necessary due to certain job positions that are heavily dependent on answering telephones. The time that will be saved from taking telephone calls will be diverted to providing better face-to-face service as library staff will have more time to help people with enquiries and Peoples' Network queries. This will be possible due to fewer telephone interruptions, as certain existing numbers will have call divert (to the call centre) placed on them before being phased out. A question was also put forward on how staff should deal with routine enquiries from telephone calls once the call centre is in place. The aim is for libraries to take these calls, but also for staff to alert users of the extended hours telephone number for basic enquiries such as item renewals. The representative expressed the point that a decision had not been taken on whether to stop publishing individual public library numbers and instead use the call centre number and then redirect users to the specific library if a query was too specific for the call centre staff to handle.

4.3.3 Opinions from unstructured interviews

Concern was expressed by the library assistants as to the effects a call centre would have on service delivery. Of the ten interviewed, the majority thought that a call centre was a bad idea for the library service. Two individuals were undecided, whilst

one felt it was a good idea, but only for item renewals. However none of the interviewees commented that they felt their jobs would be under threat through the introduction of such a service. One concern that the researcher came across was the lack of information that had been provided for the staff, despite newsletters known to have been in circulation and plans for the call centre at an advanced stage. None of the library assistants had any clear knowledge on how the call centre would cater for library users and those that had some knowledge had only gained this from articles in the local press.

Most of the concern regarding service delivery centred on the fears that the call centre will lead to a less personalised service and any problems that were encountered on the telephone would be “taken out” on frontline staff in the libraries. When the researcher informed the interviewees that the plan for the call centre was to be seamless and that it would be answering as if it were the library this met with some approval, as it would reduce confusion and the duration of the telephone call. However, others felt users should know that they were speaking to a call centre as some users require more than one service when they telephone the library which often requires on-site facilities to be examined. This would result in more call transfers. Other concerns expressed were that some library assistants felt that they were losing part of the job they were employed to do and that the service was good enough at present. One concern that was spoken focused on whether the telephone service would in time be any better at a call centre, especially when all council services were routed to it.

Interviewees who could see some of the positives of the schemes commented on the pressures of having to serve face-to-face and telephone users at the same time, and therefore it would be better to divert some of the more basic calls away from the

frontline staff. Below is a selection of some of the comments that illustrate the overall discussion.

Respondent's comments

"We know the people and provide a more personal service"

"I can see it causing more problems than they are anticipating"

"We don't need it because we answer within five rings"

"Could get busy if all county services are routed to call centre, therefore no gains from the current system"

"If it doesn't work well staff in the libraries will get the comeback"

"It's good because there can be lots of distraction in a library which makes you unable to answer the phone"

"Some people will know that they are speaking to someone who has no idea about libraries"

4.3.4 Discussion

An overview that is gained from this section of data suggests call centres can be both beneficial, but at the same time a concern for many library staff. It has been seen as a beneficial service because call centres can reduce the pressures on frontline staff when dealing with both face-to-face and telephone users. This is evident with 8 out of 11 authorities (73%) stating this as one of the benefits and also 7 out of 9 authorities feel the time freed up from answering basic calls has been redeployed to help walk-in users. This is also evident in related literature as Kirk (2003) writes:

'(A call centre) will remove the tension that can exist when staff on service desks are interrupted during face to face transactions by the telephone ringing'

Concerns from frontline staff mostly focus on the level of knowledge the call centre staff have and how reliable the information given will be. Some of the library assistants interviewed were fearful that as they were the visible frontline staff any problems such as errors with renewals would lead to conflict. However, it was pointed out by one of the case study interviewees that this situation could happen in any case and errors can still be committed by library staff having "off" days.

The vision that came from the literature was of libraries becoming the face-to-face equivalent to call centres by offering the same information to council services as a One-Stop shop would. As Kirk (2003) writes on the subject of changes in the libraries:

'It will...mean a very substantial role serving a much wider range of customer needs, developing new knowledge and skills, together with the opportunities that go with that change'

However this was not a picture that emerged from the literature to any extent. No authorities claimed any staff time had been redeployed to answer council enquiries.

A personal concern that has been noted during the research is the impression that could be given that people who call the library are seen as an inconvenience rather than a welcome addition in order to provide the variety of job that frontline staff may require. Many respondents state the variety call centre staff enjoy due to the variety of council enquiries but, in some cases this may be reduced in libraries where staff

will constantly be serving face-to-face users. Some staff may not always want to be serving users face-to-face. However if this has the benefit of improving overall customer service this may be an issue library staff have to overcome. This is unfounded, but a feeling the researcher possesses and from personal experience.

Authorities have in most cases invested heavily in call centre developments, therefore they obviously want the take-up by the public to justify the cost, although completely cutting off telephone access to users' local libraries may do more harm than good and has to be carefully examined as a necessity by management.

Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.0 Introduction

It is hoped this investigation into public libraries and call centres has provided the reader with an understanding of the issues and background towards the recent expansion of the call centre as a means of providing access to local government services. In this chapter the main outcomes that have been identified will be reviewed, using the research headlines as guidance.

5.1 Importance of a call centre service

The growth of local government call centres is still very much in its infancy and certain authorities see this as a viable way for improving a number of issues and problems as well as facing up to government regulations for better electronic access to services. If libraries are included as one of the departments served by a call centre then the following key findings apply.

- **The results suggest a continued growth in library services using call centres to handle basic telephone enquiries.**
- **The findings suggest the installation of a call centre can benefit the public library service due to opportunities for improved efficiency, access and service quality.**

- **There are indicators that libraries can play an important role in the development of a more joined-up council service by providing more face-to-face information for the local community.**
- **The findings acknowledge the fact call centres may not be the answer to improving library services in all situations, due to local conditions.**

5.2 Management of call centres

There are some positive outcomes that have been in evidence throughout the study. A number of factors indicate that a well-managed call centre set-up has the potential to provide a quality service to library users. These factors include frontline operators being council employees, (which will prevent traditional problems such as cheap labour) a variety of enquiries, small groups of work colleagues and training opportunities.

- **The findings suggest call centre staff that take library enquiries are provided with a good overall working environment.**
- **There is an indication that users in general should benefit from an increased in telephone service quality due to a variety of ways to monitor calls and advances in telephone technology.**

- **The researcher feels it is important for call centre operators to have a period of training within libraries, in order to have a more rounded knowledge of libraries that could lead to improvements in the quality of information given during calls.**

5.3 Impact on library staff

It is been evident that with many authorities noting the potential benefits of call centres as a tool for diverting telephone enquiries, that staff may find the pressure of dealing with both methods simultaneously at peak times will be reduced. There have been a few cases of jobs being lost within libraries due to the opening of call centres, but the number of cases from the sample is too small to predict that there will be fewer faces behind the counters.

- **Staff will only notice an impact on their daily routine depending on the extent to which the library service is included in the call centre. In most cases this will be a reduction in the amount of telephone interruptions.**
- **There is concern from library staff regarding the level of knowledge held by call centre staff and how this could reflect on each library service.**

5.4 Recommendations

It has been evident since the start of this dissertation that research on such a small scale can only “scratch at the surface” of a countrywide issue. Therefore there are a number of areas to recommend for further investigation on this subject that could not be addressed within the time scale of this study.

- The call/contact centre option within local government is still very much in its infancy. It would be very interesting for more research to be carried out in 2-3 years from this study due to the predicted expansion and the increase in the amount of data available from those authorities that have opened call centres in the last year.
- It is acknowledged that due to time constraints this study did not consider the first-hand views of library users. This could perhaps be remedied in a further study.
- In order to gain a greater knowledge of how a local government call centre works, a funded study could enable more investigation nationally, such as visits to see call centre staff in action and to view the working environment.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 E-mail questionnaire

Appendix 2 Example of interview schedule

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND CALL CENTRES

I am an MA Librarianship student from the University of Sheffield and for my dissertation have chosen to investigate the impact of call centres on the public library service. In order to get a wide-ranging insight into attitudes towards calls centres, I would be grateful if you would complete the relevant parts of the questionnaire for your authority. If your authority is **not** planning a call centre, please write a brief explanation below question 2.

Results of this survey will be published on the Web in the late autumn.
<http://panizzi.shef.ac.uk/cplis/publications.htm>.

Please send your responses to this email address: lip02db@sheffield.ac.uk or print off and post to David Blunden, c/o University of Sheffield, Department of Information Studies, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN

Thank you

David Blunden

Q1. Name of Authority:

Q2. Does your public library operate a call centre?

Please place an X between the brackets

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please go to question 3 |
| 2. Planned | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please go to question 16 |
| 3. No plans | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please explain below |
| 4. Idea considered and rejected | <input type="checkbox"/> | Please explain below |

Section 1

Q3. How long has your authority's call centre been in operation? (The time it has been offering library related enquiries)

Please place an X between the brackets

- | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. 1 year or less | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. 1-2 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. 2-3 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. 3-4 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. 4-5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. 5 years or more | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q4. How many staff, roughly are employed in the call centre that provides the service to library users?

- | | |
|-------------|-----|
| 1. 0-20 | [] |
| 2. 21-40 | [] |
| 3. 41-60 | [] |
| 4. 61-80 | [] |
| 5. 81-100 | [] |
| 6. Over 100 | [] |

Q5. In which of the following ways is your call centre operated?

Please place an X between the brackets

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. In-house | [] |
| 2. In-house distributed (working in different departments) | [] |
| 3. Outsourced | [] |
| 4. Outsourced distributed (operators on more than one site) | [] |

Q6. What were the three core reasons for establishing a call centre for your authority that caters for library users?

-
-
-

Q7. Briefly, how are staff managed to ensure that their interest is maintained and that they remain with the organisation?

Q8. Please enter the main library related tasks that the call centre operators are trained to perform.

Please place an X between the brackets

- | | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Renewals | [] |
| 2. Reference enquiries | [] |
| 3. Item enquiries | [] |
| 4. Item reservations | [] |
| 5. Account enquires (e.g. query fines) | [] |
| 6. Account payments | [] |
| 7. Information on children's services | [] |
| 8. Computer bookings | [] |
| 9. General enquiries (e.g. opening hours) | [] |
| 10. Other (please specify) | [] |

9. Has the shift towards call centres led to related job losses in your libraries?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. Yes [] No []

- Q9a. If **No**, how has the time saved been redeployed?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. More People's Network enquiries []
 2. More Council enquiries []
 3. More time spend with customers []
 4. Other (please specify) []

- Q10. In which of the following ways do you monitor service quality?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. Listening to calls []
 2. Monitoring calls to review at a later date []
 3. "Mystery shopping" techniques []
 4. Monitoring complaints []
 5. Surveying callers (e.g. phone questionnaire) []
 6. Benchmarking against other organisations []
 7. Other (please state) []

- Q11. Which of the following methods do you use to deal with telephone queues?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. Recorded music []
 2. Telling customer their position in queue []
 3. Offer a call back option []
 4. Other (please specify) []

- Q12. What phone numbering strategy do you have for library related enquiries?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. One number for all library enquiries []
 2. Selective numbering (users channelled to relevant operator) []
 3. Other (please specify) []

- Q13. What have been the main concerns voiced by library staff since the call centre has been in use?

Q14. What benefits have libraries in your authority reported that have come from the opening of the call centre?

Q15. What feedback have you had from library users regarding the change to using a call centre?

Now go to question 24

Section 2 Please complete this section **only** if you are **planning** to introduce a Call Centre

Q16. What were the **three** core reasons behind setting up the call centre?

-
-
-

Q17. What kind of impact do you think the call centre will have on the following areas related to the library service?

Please place an X between the brackets

17.1 Public opinion

Very positive [] Positive [] Indifferent []

Negative [] Very negative []

Please briefly comment on your answer if necessary:

17.2 Opinions from frontline staff

Very positive [] Positive [] Indifferent []

Negative [] Very negative []

Please briefly comment on your answer if necessary:

17.3 Efficiency of service

- Very positive [] Positive [] Indifferent []
- Negative [] Very negative []

Please briefly comment on your answer if necessary:

Q18. How are you planning to operate the call centre?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. In-house []
2. In-house distributed (working in different departments) []
3. Outsourced []
4. Outsourced distributed (operators on more than one site) []

Q19. Many private sector call centre are branded 'sweatshops' due to the poor management of staff. How is it planned to manage the call centre staff in your authority?

Q20. Which of the following library related transactions have been identified that the call centre could handle?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. Renewals []
2. Reference enquiries []
3. Item enquiries []
4. Item reservations []
5. Account enquires (e.g. query fines) []
6. Account payments []
7. Information on children's services []
8. Computer bookings []
9. General enquiries (e.g. opening hours) []
10. Other (please specify) []

Q21. Which of the following do you consider to be the most important?

Please place an X between the brackets

1. A better quality of telephone service []
2. Saving money []
3. Other (please specify) []

Q22. How is the library service planning to advertise the new call centre number?

Q23. What strategies are you using to explain to staff how the implementation of the call centres will affect them?

Q24. Thank you for completing the questionnaire. I would like to talk to a sample of respondents by telephone. If you are happy for me to ring you later please leave your contact details below.

Name

Position

Phone:

E-mail

Please send your responses to this email address: lip02db@sheffield.ac.uk or print off and post to **David Blunden, c/o University of Sheffield, Department of Information Studies, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN**

Meeting 2nd July '03, with Authority B

Where has your research come from on call centres?

1. How would you describe the role that the call centre would play within the library service?

- Renewing/opening times, item availability/reservations (at what point would users be transferred?)
- What would happen to current renewals lines?
- How much influence does the library service have compared to other CC depts (is it geared towards to some rather than others?)
- How will it be advertised? Leaflets/fone no. on date labels?
- 24 hr staffing?

2. Management in call centres

- How would the workload be rotated?
- How would you cope with "last caller syndrome"? I.e. offering same quality of service from 1st to last
- Training on computers -galaxy
- What about libraries knowing their users? People who usually 'play the system'
- How would you manage queues?

3. Impacts on library staff

- Should lib staff especially. Assistants have any concern about the future of their jobs?
- Would staff have to say next time please call the call centre for renewals?
- Will staff actually notice any real differences?

4. Impacts on members of public

- Changing peoples modes/methods of contact (difficult?) Want info on lib ren or opening times would think of calling lib
- How to overcome traditional methods to make it worthwhile

Would they notice any differences?