

answering the call:

current HR practice in local authority contact centres

# research report



**researcher and report author:**

Michael Webb (Employers’ Organisation for local government)

**project managers:**

George Nahlis (Employers’ Organisation for local government)  
and David Hunter (Improvement and Development Agency)

## acknowledgements

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## introduction

There is now a great deal of experience in local authority contact centres about day-to-day HR practice such as recruitment, training and performance appraisal as well as about wider organisational development issues such as staffing structures and job design.

However, no recent investigation has been carried out to explore the range of different approaches, nor has there been any one place that local authorities can go to for examples of HR documentation which would help them to avoid reinventing the wheel.

In response to continuing demand from councils for guidance in this area, the EO and the IDeA decided to address this lack of information by building on their broader 2001 report 'Call and Contact Centres in Local Government – Getting it Right!'

To this end, they teamed up with the **Local Authority Call Centre Benchmark Group** (BMG), a well-established forum for councils to share their experience with like-minded colleagues. This work resulted in two outcomes:

- research into the range of HR in local authority contact centres – the **findings** are presented in this report, and
- an **online library** (see website address below) providing real-world examples of documents such as job descriptions and career progression frameworks. Links to relevant material in the library can be found throughout this report.



## background to the research

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In March and April 2004, eight local authority contact centres, all members of the BMG, completed a detailed questionnaire and provided documents relating to human resource issues in their contact centres. The research is based on their questionnaire responses.

The following authorities took part in the project: London Borough of Lewisham, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Sheffield City Council, Reading Borough Council and Gosford City Council in New South Wales, Australia. Three respondents asked to remain anonymous. We have therefore used the pseudonyms 'London Borough A', 'London Borough B' and 'Big City' when referring to them.

Although the survey was not intended to be comprehensive with results that are representative of local authority contact centres, it does show, in some detail, a range of approaches across a group of authorities that, via membership of the BMG, demonstrate a strong interest in propagating good practice.

## the key message

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The research shows there is no single model of practice for contact centres in local government. As with so much else, the approach is governed by local factors such as contact centre strategy, service demand and local labour markets. Nevertheless, the range of practice described in this report gives a good indication of the decisions to be taken and the factors to be considered when setting up or reorganising contact centre operations. Some of these are highlighted in the report as 'action points', which may be used to inform authority strategy.

## about the contact centres

The **number of full-time equivalent staff** employed by the respondents range from nine to 80 with most employing over 30.

Most of the respondents represent corporate contact centres, **covering a range of service areas**. The most common are street services, refuse, environment, social services, revenues, benefits and general enquiries. Two respondents are **single-service centres**: Tower Hamlets for housing repairs and London Borough B for revenues and benefits. Sheffield has **outsourced contact centres** for revenues and benefits, waste management and housing repairs in addition to the corporate operations described in this report.

Some respondents deal only with **telephone enquiries** (including the two single-service centres) but most also cover **electronic enquiries** such as email or web-based electronic forms. Lewisham uses **video conferencing** and Sheffield is considering **SMS** (text messaging) as an access channel.

The most common **types of activity** are providing information about council services, signposting and referrals. Other activities commonly handled by the respondents are: dealing with changes in circumstances; payment transactions; assessment/determination of eligibility for services; and case handling.

Most respondents offer some type of **extended opening hours**. Three are open 24 hours, seven days a week with others opening until early evening and some on Saturday morning.

The contact centres surveyed are located in a variety of places **within the overall council structure**, but the most common lines of reporting are to the chief executive and/or corporate services. London Borough A's contact centre forms part of the one-stop-shop service. Some contact centres (eg Sheffield, London Borough B) have **service level agreements** with the back office or service areas and some have more informal arrangements (eg Tower Hamlets, Lewisham).

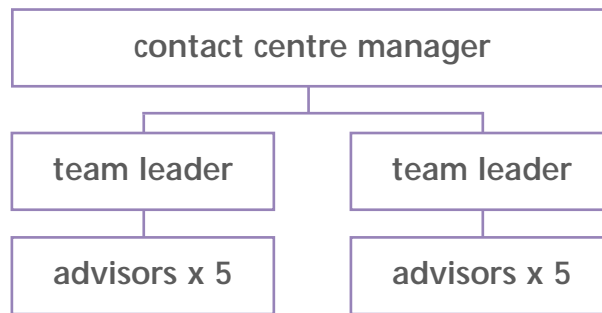
There is an even split regarding the physical location of the contact centres, with half of respondents based in council buildings and half in leased premises within the council's geographical boundaries. Sheffield shares its premises with the local police force's communications centre.



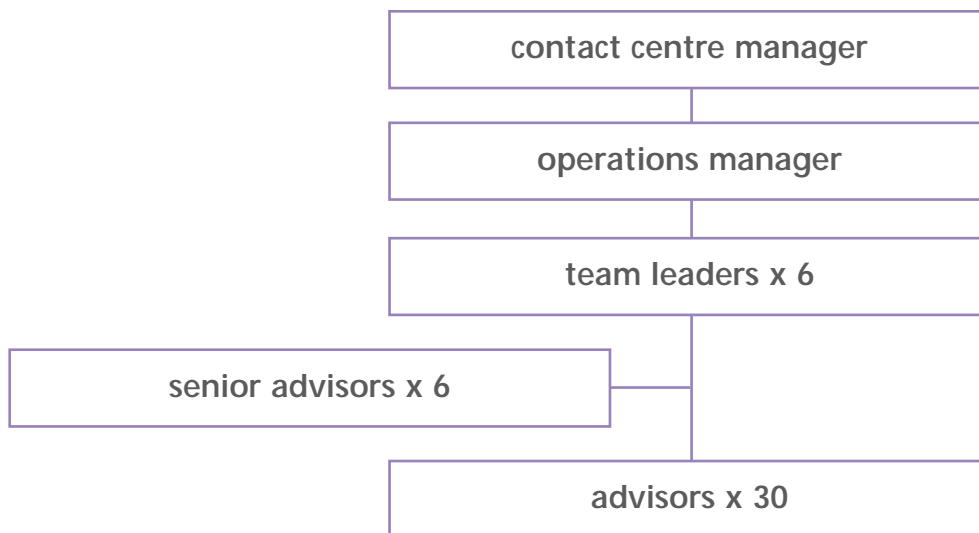
visit the online library for...  
...contact centre  
organisational  
charts

## staffing structures and roles

The respondents **organise their contact centre staff** in very similar ways. Although job titles vary, the basic staff consist of a manager, team leaders and advisors (see figure 1). Larger contact centres also have senior advisors and, possibly, operations or duty manager(s) (see figure 2).



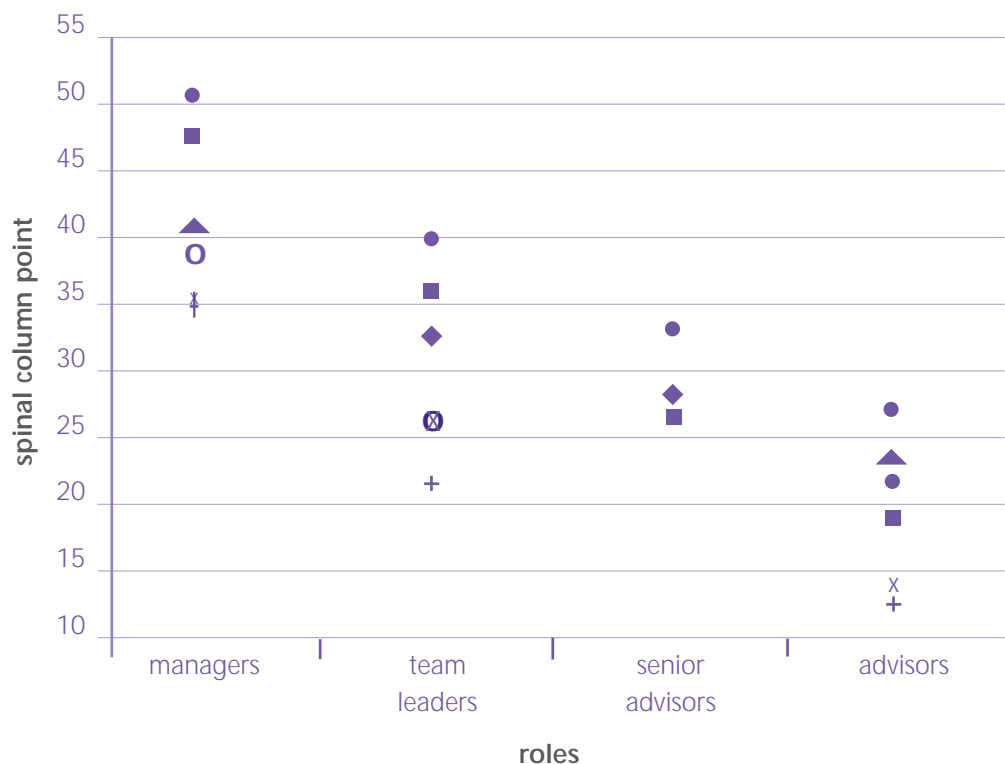
**figure 1:** a possible staffing structure for a small contact centre



**figure 2:** a possible staffing structure for a larger contact centre

Big City, the largest contact centre in our survey (80 FTE staff), employs a ‘team coach’ and **five analysts and reporting staff**. Lewisham, the second-largest contact centre among our respondents with 72 FTE staff, also employs three FTE **staff development officers**. London Borough A’s contact centre is integrated into the one-stop-shop service, which includes face-to-face, IT, finance and performance staff.

Figure 3 shows the pay range for four roles within responding contact centres. Some local authorities did not provide pay scales for all posts. (NB We have omitted pay information for Gosford). While this information should not be considered comprehensive, this graph is indicative of the considerable variations in pay between contact centres, which probably depend on local labour market conditions and the nature of the role. In addition, it should be remembered that four of the seven authorities are London boroughs.



**figure 3:** Pay in seven local authority contact centres by role based on mid-point of spinal column point range (each symbol denotes a different authority)

visit the online library for...  
...job descriptions  
and person  
specifications  
for all posts

## advisors

The role of customer service advisors primarily depends on **the nature of the service provided**. In the Tower Hamlets Housing Repairs Help Centre, advisors provide detailed advice, log repair requests with contractors and follow up jobs. They also solicit tenant feedback on the centre's performance and are required to have experience of frontline housing management.

At Reading, a small contact centre, the **service coverage is broader** but deals with **fewer complex transactions** – advisors provide general advice on a number of areas but, in most cases, hand over more complex calls to, or log requests with, service staff.

In other contact centres, there is **a mixture of general activities** such as signposting and providing information and more specialist tasks, for example, dealing with detailed enquiries and making assessments. In Lewisham, advisors are divided into two service 'families' (revenues and benefits or regeneration and switchboard). At London Borough A's one-stop shop and contact centre, there are three levels of advisor with increasing service knowledge requirements – telephone operator; contact centre advisor; and customer services officers who place service requests, deal with complaints, and also carry out face-to-face interviews.

Advisors carry out a range of tasks during '**down time**' (ie when not answering calls). The most common activities are making follow-up calls or call backs and related admin (eg assessing claims). Other activities include making calls to monitor customer satisfaction and replying to voicemail or other access channel (eg email) enquiries. Sheffield has minimised down time through its self-rostering system which is led by demand for service (see 'matching staff to demand' on page 13).

Sheffield and London Borough B reported that the introduction of a contact centre has **expanded the role of former 'telephonists'**. At Sheffield, staff take a much wider range of calls through to resolution and, at London Borough B, staff now update accounts and claims information in real time. Lewisham commented that, because the roles have changed so much, there is no comparison between the pre-contact centre period and the current arrangement.



Lewisham, London Borough B and Sheffield use **a competency-based approach to progression** whereby staff gain service knowledge and experience of complex cases to progress to a higher grade or spinal point.

As Sheffield's contact centre expands, it hopes to move to a structure similar to that of London Borough A with **staff arranged by complexity of transaction type** from providing information through 'information capture' and dealing with requests and complaints to diagnosis, assessment and referral.

Training and experience generally guide advisors on **when to hand over a call** to a more senior colleague or to a service professional. Sheffield and Lewisham also use case-based reasoning software to help them determine how to handle a call.

Some larger contact centres (Tower Hamlets, Lewisham, Big City) have a **senior advisor role**. Broadly, the person in this role deals with more complex enquiries or complaints ('escalated calls'), assists and deputises for the team leader, and often trains advisors.

team leaders

All respondents had a team leader or supervisor post in their contact centre who was generally responsible for the day-to-day management of staff and performance.

**Managing staff** includes tasks such as organising rotas and communicating with staff. At Lewisham, the team leader manages 21 staff; at London Borough A, nine regularly and occasionally up to 18; at Big City, 15 to 20; at Sheffield, five; and at Tower Hamlets, 15.

**Managing performance** involves monitoring individual performance, analysing team performance data, and taking steps to improve both.

The other main role is **staff development**, eg carrying out appraisals, coaching staff and identifying training needs.

Team leaders are also often responsible for maintaining **good relationships with internal customers and external partners**. For example, at Tower Hamlets, they are responsible for effective partnership with repairs contractors.

They may also be responsible for **handling complaints or complex requests**, especially where the senior advisor role does not exist.

At Big City, team leaders are required to be studying at least for an NVQ in supervising call handling.

## managers

Four respondents provided job descriptions for managers. Generally, they are responsible for meeting business plan objectives and service targets, which involves devising and implementing improvements in the contact centre operation.

Sheffield **summarises the role** as managing people; managing activities to meet customer requirements; managing information; and managing resources. Lewisham describes it as effectively managing, monitoring and delivering voice communication across its public services division.

## other staff

At Lewisham, there are three **staff development officers** who, in addition to call-handling activities, assist staff development through coaching and mentoring and support team leaders in monitoring and providing feedback on staff performance.

At Big City, **five analysts and reporting staff** are employed, apparently because of the sophistication of the software and hardware used and the scope of the contact centre.

The business analyst maintains and improves cross-business processes. The quality analyst carries out continuous, quality-assurance reviews, eg ensuring service level agreements are met and conducting customer surveys. The forecasting and scheduling analyst ensures staff are managed and that work is distributed to match customer demand. The reporting specialist and the admin/reporting assistant produce and maintain quality reports and performance data for the analysts.

### action point: width, depth and service knowledge

While some contact centres cover only one service in depth, others have wider but shallower coverage. However, many cover several services but some in greater depth than others.

The different levels of service knowledge required have brought about several staffing solutions: division into 'service families', different levels of advisor with increasing service knowledge or staff arranged by complexity of transaction.

## recruitment

Most respondents have used a **mixture of redeployment and recruitment** (internal and external) to staff their contact centre. However, Reading and Sheffield set up with redeployed staff and then recruited (Sheffield has also redeployed staff from service areas since setting up) whereas London Borough B set up with new staff. London Borough A, Lewisham and Tower Hamlets both redeployed and recruited initially. London Borough A and Lewisham continue to do so but Tower Hamlets now only recruits.

Tower Hamlets and London Borough B used **recruitment agencies** and Lewisham had an **assessment centre open day** to recruit to the contact centre. When recruiting, most authorities advertise posts both internally and externally.

Face-to-face interviews are used by all respondents in the selection process, but these are often accompanied by an **initial telephone interview** and/or **customer service simulation exercise**.

The **person specifications** for customer service advisors provided by respondents include the obvious skills in customer care, IT and teamworking. Big City originally asked for basic skills in English, keyboard use and IT. This was reflected in relatively low pay at entry level, although there is a clear career progression structure. However, the authority has recently increased this minimum requirement as it has had enormous responses to recruitment campaigns, possibly due to high local unemployment rates.

While most councils also included some **service knowledge** in their person specifications, this was not necessarily a precondition for employment. Reading covers service area knowledge in its training – the respondent stated that the tight local labour market



means they have a small pool of candidates. Sheffield summarises this approach as 'recruiting for skills and training for knowledge'. However, Tower Hamlets has experienced problems in ensuring the recruitment process identifies whether candidates have sufficient customer care skills.

**Women made up the majority of staff** in all the contact centres that responded. All the staff in Reading are women and 95 per cent in Sheffield (both employ fewer than 15 people). However, 45 per cent of the staff at the Tower Hamlets Housing Repairs Help Centre are men.

In other respects, the **composition of the workforce** reflects local labour markets. For example, approximately 30 per cent of staff in the contact centre at London Borough B are from black or minority ethnic groups; 40 per cent at Tower Hamlets; and 60 per cent at Lewisham.

There are considerable differences in the age of the workforce. For example, half of staff were under 30 in Lewisham. This could be due to the importance of the 5pm to 9pm shift, which is compatible with full-time study. On the other hand, 83 per cent of the staff at Sheffield are over 50 (although there are only 13.4 full-time equivalents).

Some approaches aimed at **supporting equal opportunities** used by the respondents are advertising in specialist magazines and encouraging applications from people with disabilities, young and older people. Tower Hamlets has specific posts for Bengali/Sylheti-speaking staff to meet service requirements.

Lewisham and Sheffield both highlighted the issues associated with **transferring staff from other parts of the authority**. Some staff had problems adapting to the new culture when the customer service function was centralised at Lewisham. Sheffield has recently integrated staff from other service areas into an existing team. This change was managed through a programme of joint project working, knowledge sharing, work shadowing and exchange visits.

### action point: recruit or redeploy?

Redeploying staff ensures service expertise but the process must be carefully managed, and existing terms and conditions may be restrictive in a contact centre environment. Newly-recruited staff may be more flexible but a lot depends on the local labour market. A good approach might be 'recruiting for skills, training for knowledge'.

## matching staff to demand

visit the online library for...

...information  
on Sheffield's  
rostering system  
and a sample rota

Apart from Lewisham and Sheffield, the respondents all have very few **part-time staff**. In most cases, the majority of staff works **a variety of shifts** during extended working hours.

Tower Hamlets and Lewisham still have a substantial number of staff working 9am to 5pm. In Lewisham's case, they are supplemented by 19 staff (about 20 per cent of the headcount) working a 5pm to 9pm **evening shift**. All staff also work one Saturday in three. Also, the borough ensured staff matched opening hours by making **acceptance of changing shift patterns** a precondition for employment. London Borough A did the same as it had problems recruiting for its 12pm to 8pm shift.

The two authorities with contact centres open 24 hours that responded to this section have different approaches to **night shifts**. Big City claims that its entire staff are completely flexible. It uses 'Openwave', a workforce management tool, to create **service-driven rosters**. On the other hand, Tower Hamlets has a dedicated team of 10 night-shift staff.

Tower Hamlets **discontinued extended opening hours** from 7am to 9pm due to lack of demand for the Housing Repairs Help Centre service in the evening. Daytime hours are now 7am to 5pm. Staff volunteer to do a 7am to 3pm shift for no extra pay; the majority of staff work 9am to 5pm, and a night shift provides an emergency service.

Tower Hamlets also maintains a pool of 12 **casual workers** (about 25 per cent of the total headcount) to supplement its permanent staff. These staff work irregular hours on a no-work, no-pay basis to cover sickness absence and leave, most often on Monday or Friday and/or on weekday mornings when service demand is highest. However, this practice may be possible only in a high unemployment area like Inner London.

Sheffield operates a **flexible rostering system** with its opening hours of 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. Staff agree three weeks in advance which hours they will work in accordance with the minimum number of advisors required (based on historical service patterns). At peak times, staff can accrue time which is then paid back during quieter periods. One benefit is that staff down time when they are not answering calls is minimised. Most staff work 15 to 24 hours a week.

London Borough A, Lewisham and Tower Hamlets gave details of **specific flexible working arrangements** beyond rotating shifts. They all have staff working on flexitime. London Borough A and Lewisham operate compressed weeks or fortnights. Lewisham also has two term-time workers and makes study breaks available to students.

Lewisham and Big City faced **opposition from trade unions** to flexible hours/shifts. Lewisham negotiated a clause in the contract to give staff advance notice of changing shift patterns. Big City went ahead without union agreement. However, Sheffield had **active union support** for its flexible rostering system, which still meets customer demand.

One respondent commented that 'the flexibility [...] required, [...] more often than not has to be negotiated locally, which more depends on the 'relationship' the organisation has with the respective unions, rather than the decisions on contracts being based around service requirements'.

#### **action point: having sufficient staff at the right time**

Staffing issues can often run counter to user demand in a contact centre environment. There are several solutions to this difficult problem. One approach is to use part-time or casual staff to supplement 9am to 5pm staff to cover extended hours. Another approach is the fully-flexible shift system, but this may face opposition from trade unions. A compromise might be found through self-rostering, which can help to match employees' preferred hours to service demand.

## training

Most respondents have developed **in-house training** for their contact centre staff, although the majority supplemented it with **externally-purchased training**.

An **initial training period of two weeks** followed up by five days' training a year seem to be common to all respondents.

Most respondents' **initial training** covered technology/operational skills, service or council-specific knowledge and customer care/communications. However, Reading's initial training programme covered technology and operational areas only with other areas addressed in ongoing training. This may be because the service provided is signposting/advice, and recruitment difficulties mean staff must 'go live' as soon as possible.

Staff can train for **national vocational qualifications** in seven of the eight contact centres surveyed (Sheffield has an in-house customer service certificate). The most popular qualifications are NVOs in customer service. Other qualifications include those awarded by the Institute of Customer Service and the service-specific Institute of Housing<sup>1</sup>. Gosford uses an Australian customer service qualification.

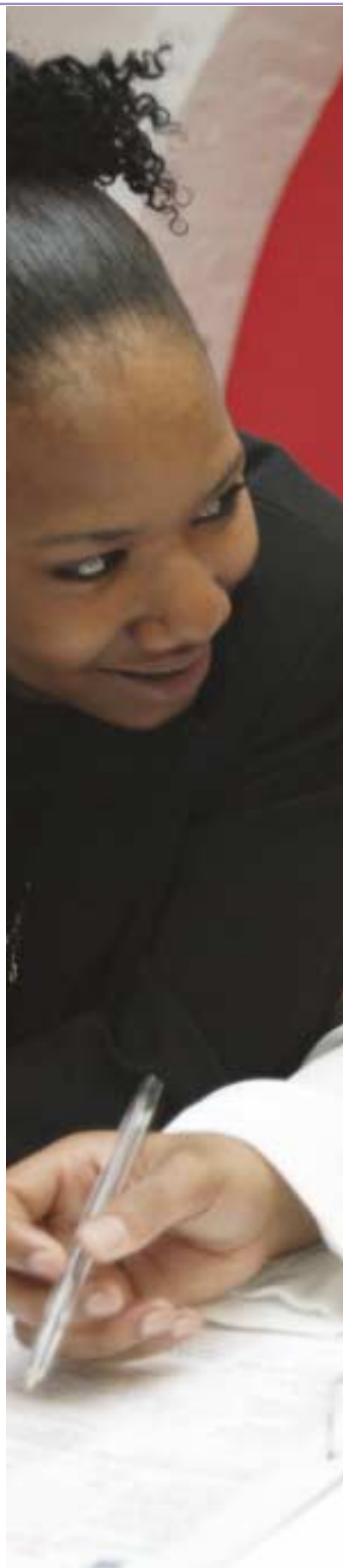
**Career progression** at Big City is based on NVOs. Staff move from the Call Handling Operations NVQ via the Supervising Call Handling NVQ to the Managing Call Handling NVQ. Duty managers at the top of their grade study for a post graduate certificate in management.

Sheffield has cut down on time spent updating staff on developments and maintaining reference material, and has reduced duplication of information by **investing in central electronic systems**.

London Borough B has **improved staff motivation** by transferring an advisor to a full-time training role. Lewisham underlined its commitment to **Investors in People**, employing a range of training techniques to suit individual learning styles.

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<sup>1</sup> However, at a recent meeting of the BMG, there was concern about low take-up of qualifications. Some members felt the necessary study demanded more time than many employees were able or prepared to commit to. Tight staffing meant that few could allow staff to study during working hours.



## accessibility for service users

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All respondents took at least two of the following steps to **increase the accessibility** of the contact centres' services:

- employing a diverse/representative workforce
- providing access to interpreting and translation services for community languages
- telephone services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing such as Minicom or Typetalk.

The four London boroughs and Big City also provided a **direct community language line**, unsurprising given their ethnically diverse populations.

Encouraging **self-service through the website** was another popular approach.

Lewisham and London Borough A provide support for people with learning disabilities through specialist training for staff.

Lewisham has a **'Tellytalk' video conferencing system** that allows citizens in neighbourhood offices and libraries to communicate face-to-face with staff at the town hall and at other organisations.



## development and retention

Annual **turnover** of staff varied from four per cent to 17 per cent for the four contact centres that provided figures. The highest rate was at London Borough B's revenues and benefits contact centre during the period immediately after opening in January 2003 with newly-recruited staff. Turnover has now stabilised.

The most common techniques used to **encourage staff development or to aid retention** are personal development plans and team-building events. Secondments, exit interviews and 'buddy' systems are also popular.

Lewisham **encourages good attendance** by increasing annual leave entitlement and has a customer services awards ceremony for exceptional performers.

Another way to develop and retain staff is through formal career progression schemes:

- London Borough B has a formal career progression procedure. The advisor needs to demonstrate that s/he has all the competencies at her/his current level and also to perform the core duties at the next. Lewisham also uses a competency assessment framework for career progression.
- Sheffield has a similar scheme where progression depends on in-depth service knowledge and experience of complex enquiries. Staff must also hold Sheffield's in-house Customer Service Certificate. Progress is recorded in a competence-based evidence portfolio. Big City has a career progression structure based on NVQs and the achievement of required levels in key performance indicators as well as competencies.

### action point: holding on to staff

Contact centres in the wider economy have a reputation for high turnover although our respondents have had mixed experiences. There are a number of ways to improve retention. Formal career progression is a popular approach; it can be based on competencies or qualifications.

visit the online library for...

...appraisal forms  
and documents  
used in assessing  
staff performance

## staff performance

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Most respondents to this section use all of the following techniques to assess staff performance:

- individual and team targets
- call recording or monitoring
- response times
- 'mystery shopper' and customer surveys.

There are some exceptions. Sheffield do not use targets but instead combine appraisals, call recording/monitoring and customer surveys with observations.

Tower Hamlets will be introducing call recording this year. Lewisham uses work quality checks in addition to the above techniques.

The 'development and retention' section on page 17 outlines how performance is linked to career progression.

## further information

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The online library includes a bibliography of material produced since 2000 that is relevant to HR practices in local authority contact centres. Most of this material is available to download from the Internet.

If you have any questions and comments on the topics in this report, please contact David Hunter, e-Government Strategic Advisor at the IDeA (david.hunter@idea.gov.uk, tel: 020 7296 6291).

For more information on the report or to contribute material to the online library, please contact Michael Webb at the EO (michael.webb@lg-employers.gov.uk).

To contact the Benchmark Group, please email Keith Paulin (keith.paulin@towerhamlets.gov.uk) or Harry Gulrajani (harry.gulrajani@haringey.gov.uk).

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Improvement and Development Agency  
Layden House  
76-86 Turnmill Street  
London EC1M 5LG



**tel** 020 7296 6600 **email** [info@idea.gov.uk](mailto:info@idea.gov.uk)  
**web** [www.idea.gov.uk](http://www.idea.gov.uk)

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Employers' Organisation for local government  
Layden House  
76-86 Turnmill Street  
London EC1M 5LG



**tel** 020 7296 6600 **email** [eo-comms@lg-employers.gov.uk](mailto:eo-comms@lg-employers.gov.uk)  
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The **Local Authority Call Centre Benchmark Group** was established in 2001 to enable local authorities and other public sector organisations running or planning call or contact centres to compare performance and share best practice. Our membership is made up of call and contact centre managers and others directly involved in delivering public services through contact centres. The membership is nationwide with over 50 member authorities as well as other public service organisations.

For information and joining details, **email:**  
[keith.paulin@towerhamlets.gov.uk](mailto:keith.paulin@towerhamlets.gov.uk) or  
[harry.gulrajani@haringey.gov.uk](mailto:harry.gulrajani@haringey.gov.uk)

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