

Accreditation guidance

*Issued on behalf of the Contact Council,
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Sir David Varney's report to the Chancellor in December 2006, Service Transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer, made a number of recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government's contact centres.

The Varney report recommended 'that all taxpayer funded contact centres are required to undergo formal published accreditation by December 2008'. This includes those contact centres that are outsourced (for example to the private or voluntary sector) but which are publicly funded.

Accreditation is a process which confirms the adherence to specific standards and levels of practice in contact centres. Standards are generally established by public and private sector contact centre practitioners through the auspices of a coordinating body. There are a number of such bodies in the UK.

The purpose of attaining accreditation by an industry recognized body is to provide some independent evidence that the publicly funded contact centre is fit for purpose in relation to the services it is delivering. Specific recommendations from an accreditation should enable the contact centre to direct improvement activities.

The following comments summing up the purpose of contact centre accreditation were taken from a recent Contact Council meeting:

"The obvious is that it demonstrates your guardianship of the large bit of public money you have responsibility for, makes sure you are being productive, and gives you a badge to say you are doing OK. It is also a banner around which you can unite everyone in your organisation as to the progress you are making.

And specifically,

- Make sure you are standardised against conventional/intellectual best practise – **standards achievement**
- Give you a sense that you are developing your business according to a game plan (that your game plan is match fit!) – **strategic direction verification.**
- Lets you know how you are doing against the norm – **comparative performance**
- Give impetus to sharing a sense of mission with your staff – **shared vision opportunity**
- Prove that you have not just concentrated on your command and control systems but have got your systems right – **system identification**

- That all your effort and energy is ultimately being directed toward the primary objective of delivering a service to the public – **public mandate**”

The Contact Council does not recommend one set of standards over another but does request that contact centres use standards from a body that has broad public and private sector industry representation or, at a minimum, uses a broad representation of organisations to construct their standards. Where possible, the accreditation should assess the contact centre specifically and not the wider organisation.

Several contact centres may club together to purchase their accreditation standards and certification inspections. This practice is commonplace amongst central government departments.

Accreditation involves first choosing a standard against which to accredit the contact centre and second choosing an organisation to carry out the accreditation inspection. The latter often needs to be a **certification** body approved or authorised by the former as the accreditation process for a particular standard may be carried out by several different organisations that have been approved by the body setting that standard.

A typical accreditation assessment can include a review of the following:

- Client and customer focus
- Performance and operational effectiveness
- Recruitment, selection and retention strategies
- Learning & development and
- Legislation, regulation and policies.

Some standards organisations hold workshops which explain their accreditation standard and a typical accreditation process. In some cases users can pre-assess themselves online before undergoing formal accreditation. Having chosen a standard against which to assess the contact centre, the contact centre manager will need to find a certification body to carry out the independent inspection.

The following is a list of organisations that provide customer contact standards that are currently used by public sector contact centres:

- EFQM
- Chartermark (revised customer services standard)
- Call Centre Association (CCA)
- Institute of Customer Services (ICS) – contact centre staff qualification
- Telephone Helplines Association (specifically for helplines)

Certification bodies include:

- BSI Management Systems
- LRQA Ltd
- SGS United Kingdom Ltd
- Charter Mark Assessment Services
- East Midlands Quality Centre Limited
- Centre for Assessment Ltd

Case study

The case study below sets out the process that HMRC has undergone to prepare its contact centres for accreditation. It explains both how HMRC carried out the process on its own sites and how emerging results are being applied throughout HMRC's Contact Centre network.

Background

The accreditation of HMRC's 22 contact centres was organised and managed by a project team ('the team') of 5 people, who prepared project documentation, timeline, communications etc.

Seeking accreditation for each of HMRC's 22 sites would have been costly so it was decided to bring all of the sites to the required standard and then seek accreditation for HMRC contact centre estate. An initial sample of sites was agreed with both the accreditation standards and the certification bodies. This made best use not only of the funds available but also the resources available to manage the project.

Process

HMRC asked each of its Contact Centre Managers (CCM) to nominate a representative who would have responsibility for accreditation in their site and asked each CCM to ensure that they personally and visibly backed the programme. HMRC held a one-day workshop with all CCMs, explaining the standard and the drivers for seeking accreditation. CCMs were then asked to complete a GAP analysis* for their respective sites.

From this HMRC was able to create an overall GAP analysis on a Red/Amber/Green basis against each of the subsections in each of the criteria. This allowed the department to concentrate its efforts on where additional work was required. For example, it was found that the way each manager keeps personnel files varied from site to site. The team issued a cover sheet showing how the files should be maintained. Again, HMRC found that awareness of its vision and strategy and targets was varied, so it used the opportunity to deliver a powerpoint presentation* that was rolled out to all sites to raise awareness in these areas.

HMRC appointed Regional reps who were the point of contact between the project and the sites, sharing best practice and communicating ideas. For example the team gathered together a list of the gaps and issued a suggested programme of "buzz" sessions to be used in each centre and across each team. Items discussed included vision & strategy, security awareness and attendance management processes.

HMRC took the purchased standard to devise a questionnaire¹ (a mock assessment) which would approximate the questions that the assessors would use during site reviews. Each of the sites was visited by the project team and a random number of staff was selected from across all grades. The team ran through the questions which

¹ Documents available from HMRC(Linda.Maslan@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk)

allowed us to see where any gaps lay and to do additional work to fill them. This gave the team the assurance that it was on track to achieving accreditation.

As each site was assessed the team passed on information from their experience to each of the sites still waiting to be assessed, so for example, the team we passed on how the days were structured and gave examples of the questions that the assessors asked at each level. This ensured that the process gained momentum and impacted positively throughout our whole network.

Results

The team received very positive feedback following the mock assessment. The project team could have handled it differently by carrying out an initial mock assessment and then used the subsequent 3 months in getting the sites up to speed in time for the actual assessment. This would have made the whole process shorter but it was felt strongly that this should not be confined to a badge hunting exercise but one in which HMRC contact centres could progress as an organisation and gain commitment from staff across all sites.

HMRC achieved full accreditation of all 22 sites in January 2008.

HMRC has planned a formal post-implementation review, which will commence in the next couple of months and will generate further lessons learned.

For further information on any of this case study, including copies of materials used, please contact Linda Maslen on Linda.Maslen@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk