



**Spring 2019**

**Reports of the Auditor General of Canada  
to the Parliament of Canada**

**Independent Auditor's Report**

**REPORT 1**  
**Call Centres**



Office of the  
Auditor General  
of Canada

Bureau du  
vérificateur général  
du Canada





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## **Performance audit reports**

This report presents the results of a performance audit conducted by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada under the authority of the *Auditor General Act*.

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- gather the evidence necessary to assess performance against the criteria,
- report both positive and negative findings,
- conclude against the established audit objectives, and
- make recommendations for improvement when there are significant differences between criteria and assessed performance.

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# Introduction

## Background

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### Call centre services

1.1 Canadians contact the Government of Canada to receive services and benefits that affect their social and economic well-being. According to a 2018 survey by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, Canadians contacted the government most frequently through in-person visits, at 32%, followed by using a website (28%), using the phone (26%), and using email, mail, or other methods (14%). There are 221 call centres across the federal government that serve the public and government.

1.2 When Canadians need to connect with government, they expect to be able to do so when and how they want.

1.3 For many Canadians, the phone is an important way to contact the federal government. This is especially true for people who

- are visually impaired,
- have intellectual or physical disabilities,
- do not have a computer or Internet access or the skills to use these technologies, or
- live in rural or remote regions and do not have high-speed Internet access or cannot easily get to a government office.

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### Roles and responsibilities

1.4 **Employment and Social Development Canada.** The Department has a number of call centres, including for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. The Employment Insurance call centre gives automated general information and provides claim-specific self-serve options through its automated self-service system. Callers may also want or need to speak with an agent about a claim. In the 2017–18 fiscal year, the call centre received more than 25 million calls. The Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centre gives automated general information, or callers can speak with an agent about such things as applying for disability benefits or updating banking information. In the 2017–18 fiscal year, the call centre received more than 8 million calls.

1.5 **Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.** The Department receives calls from Canadians, foreign nationals, and permanent residents about all departmental services. Clients call to find out the status of their applications for temporary and permanent residence, citizenship, and travel documents, among other things. Callers can speak with an agent if they have questions about the forms they need to fill out or about the status of their applications, for example. In the 2017–18 fiscal year, the call centre received almost 5 million calls.

1.6 **Veterans Affairs Canada.** The Department receives calls from veterans and their families about the Department's programs, benefits, and services, including disability and rehabilitation. Callers can speak with an agent to receive information about, for example, how to apply for benefits or financial support, the status of their applications, and how to appeal a decision made by the Department. In the 2017–18 fiscal year, the call centre received almost 600,000 calls.

1.7 **Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat.** The Policy on Service is the key source of Treasury Board direction to federal departments and agencies on managing their services to clients for all service delivery methods, including call centres. The Secretariat is responsible for providing advice and guidance to departments and agencies in implementing the policy and for overseeing and monitoring compliance with the policy by deputy heads.

1.8 **Shared Services Canada.** The Department is responsible for providing and maintaining the information technology infrastructure and telecommunications for all 221 of the federal government's call centres, which include those that are internal to government and those that serve the public.

## Focus of the audit

1.9 This audit focused on whether Employment and Social Development Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; and Veterans Affairs Canada provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services. At Employment and Social Development Canada, we looked at call centres for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. We also examined whether these departments reported on their call centre performance in a way that was relevant to clients, transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy. The audit also focused on whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada provided a strategy and support to enable these services.

1.10 This audit is important because call centres are a key source of government information. Callers make millions of calls to the government every year to get the information they need to make time-sensitive, important decisions. For example, they may be calling to ensure that they receive benefits on time or to find out about the status of an application.

1.11 We did not examine the funding of call centres or whether call centre agents or the automated self-service systems gave callers accurate information.

1.12 More details about the audit objective, scope, approach, and criteria are in **About the Audit** at the end of this report (see pages 18–22).



# Findings, Recommendations, and Responses

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## Overall message



1.13 Overall, we found that callers had difficulty getting through to agents at government call centres. Instead of giving callers the option to wait to speak with an agent, the Employment and Social Development Canada call centres for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, as well as the call centre at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, sent millions of calls back to the automated system or told callers to go to the website or to call back later. The majority of those who did get through to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada had to wait 30 minutes or longer to speak with an agent. The call centre at Veterans Affairs Canada allowed all callers to wait for an agent. For all four call centres, we found that for more than a million calls that did get into a queue to wait for an agent, the callers gave up waiting and hung up.

1.14 Call centres were not focused on clients when making decisions about call centre services and how they set service standards. For example, Veterans Affairs Canada stopped providing teletypewriter services for the deaf and hard of hearing without first consulting with or telling veterans. In addition, none of the call centres had service standards on the likelihood that callers would reach an agent or on the accuracy of the information they would receive. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada also did not have a service standard on how long it would take for callers to reach an agent.

1.15 Five years after the federal government started to plan the modernization and improvement of all of its call centres, Shared Services Canada's initiative to modernize all 221 federal government call centres was rolling out for only 8 call centres. At the time of our audit, the Department had not yet finalized a plan for the remaining 213 call centres.

## Call centre performance

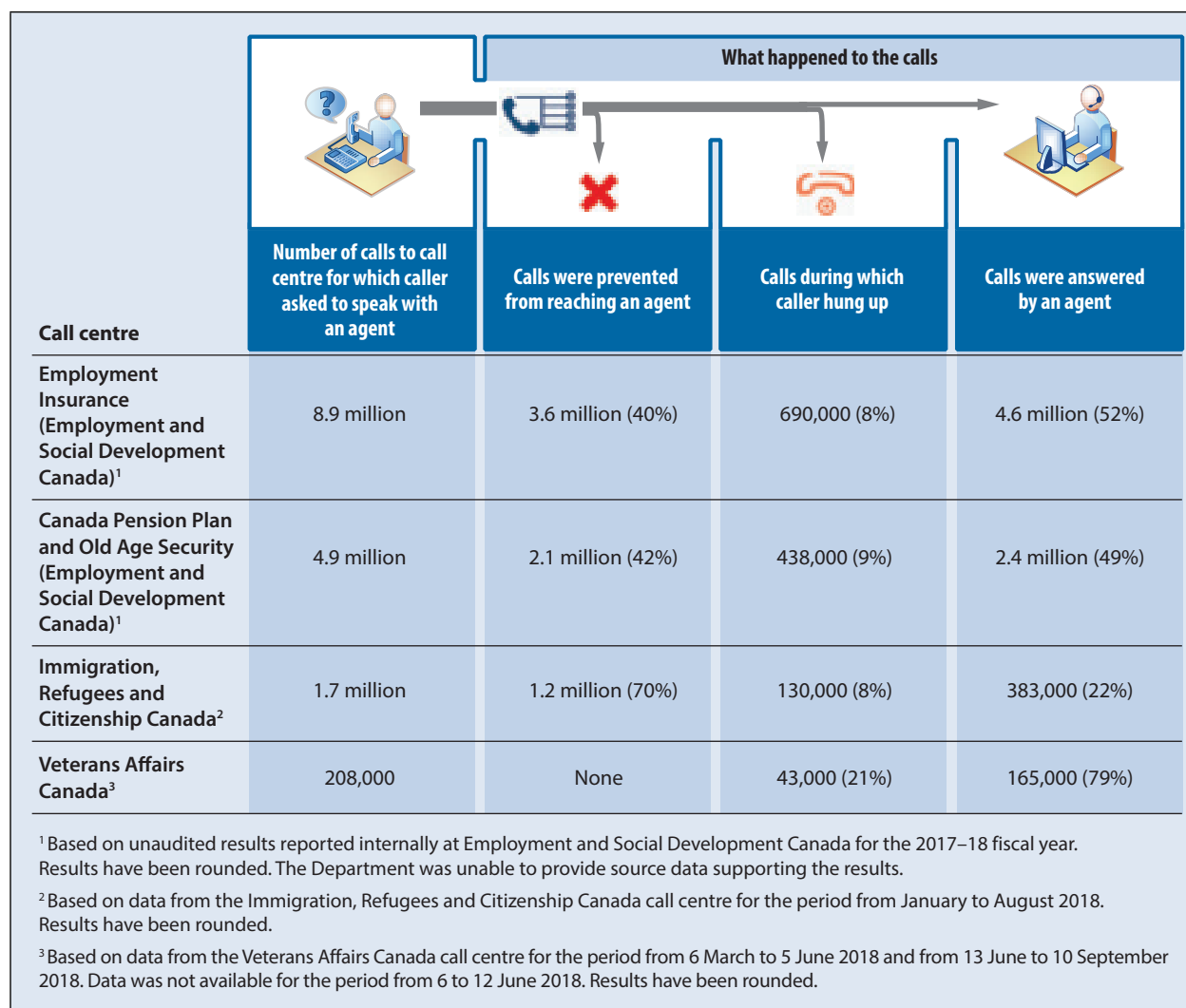
### Millions of calls were prevented from reaching an agent

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#### What we found

1.16 We found that millions of calls to the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada call centre and the call centres for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security were prevented from reaching an agent. The departments told us that this happened because the volume of calls exceeded their call centres' capacities. Instead of allowing those callers to wait to speak with an agent, the call centres sent them back to the automated system or told them to go to the website or call back later. For more than a million calls, callers who were allowed to wait to speak with an agent gave up waiting and hung up before their calls were answered (Exhibit 1.1).

**Exhibit 1.1 Millions of calls were prevented from reaching an agent**



1.17 We also found that callers who did manage to get through to an agent sometimes had to wait up to a half an hour or longer. Wait times often exceeded the call centres' timeliness targets, which ranged from 2 to 10 minutes (see paragraph 1.26).

1.18 Our analysis supporting this finding presents what we examined and discusses the following topics:

- Access to call centre agents
- Timeliness of reaching call centre agents

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**Why this finding matters**

1.19 This finding matters because people contact federal government call centres to get the information they need to make time-sensitive, important decisions about benefits and services. For example, a recipient of Employment Insurance benefits who cannot get through to an agent may not be able to receive a benefit on time or may be subject to an underpayment or overpayment.

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**Context**

1.20 Federal government call centres provide toll-free numbers for people to call. Call centres' automated self-service systems provide recorded messages and menu options so that callers can indicate their reasons for calling. Some systems also provide information and self-service options that callers can access anytime, including outside business hours, without needing to speak with an agent. Automated systems also allow callers to choose to speak with an agent, at which point calls may be placed into a queue to wait for an agent.

1.21 Call centres for Employment Insurance, the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada allow callers to serve themselves using the call centres' automated systems or to speak with an agent. Veterans Affairs Canada's call centre does not provide self-service options, because all callers are placed into a queue to speak with an agent.

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**Recommendation**

1.22 Our recommendation in this area of examination appears at paragraph 1.27.

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**Analysis to support this finding**

1.23 **What we examined.** We examined whether selected call centres provided accessible and timely services. Specifically, we looked at whether callers were able to reach an agent and if so, how long they waited to do so. We could not examine the performance of automated self-service systems, such as the number of callers who used self-service options, because not all departments retained detailed call information.

1.24 **Access to call centre agents.** We found that the Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada call centres prevented millions of calls from reaching an agent. The departments told us that this happened because the volume of calls exceeded their call centres' capacities. In contrast, the Veterans Affairs Canada call centre allowed all callers to speak with an agent.

1.25 We found that callers who wanted to speak with an agent were often prevented from doing so. Instead of being given the choice of waiting in a queue to reach an agent, they were rerouted to the automated system or asked to check the website or call back later. For example, when call volumes exceeded a threshold determined by Employment and Social

Development Canada, the Department sent callers back to the automated system. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada played a recorded message for the caller to try calling again later and then disconnected the call. In contrast, Veterans Affairs Canada allowed all callers into the queue to wait for an agent no matter how many callers were on the line. For all three departments, we also found that for more than a million calls that did get into a queue to wait for an agent, the callers gave up waiting to speak with an agent and hung up themselves (Exhibit 1.1).

**1.26 Timeliness of reaching call centre agents.** We found that when calls were answered by an agent, they were not always answered within the departments' timeliness targets or within the times that callers have stated they are willing to wait. The call centre for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not have a timeliness target. This call centre had the longest average wait time for callers to reach an agent, of 32 minutes (Exhibit 1.2). According to the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, an intergovernmental non-profit organization, respondents to its 2018 survey stated that service standards on timeliness were important. Canadians who were surveyed expected to wait an average of 7 minutes to get information or to start a transaction when they call the Government of Canada. Only two of the selected call centres met that expectation.

**Exhibit 1.2** Calls that did reach an agent were not always answered in a timely manner

Call centre	Timeliness target	Actual performance of call centre	
		Actual performance against the timeliness target (percentages have been rounded)	Average wait time (times have been rounded)
Employment Insurance (Employment and Social Development Canada)	80% of calls answered within 10 minutes <sup>1</sup>	51% of calls were answered within 10 minutes <sup>2</sup>	8 minutes <sup>2</sup>
Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security (Employment and Social Development Canada)	80% of calls answered within 10 minutes <sup>1</sup>	72% of calls were answered within 10 minutes <sup>2</sup>	5 minutes <sup>2</sup>
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada	No target	No target	32 minutes <sup>3</sup>
Veterans Affairs Canada	80% of calls answered within 2 minutes	32% of calls were answered within 2 minutes <sup>4</sup>	5 minutes <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Employment and Social Development Canada told us that these timeliness targets are set based on annualized aggregated data.  
<sup>2</sup> Based on data from the Employment and Social Development Canada call centres for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security for the period from July 2018 to January 2019.  
<sup>3</sup> Based on data from the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada call centre for the period from January to August 2018.  
<sup>4</sup> Based on data from the Veterans Affairs Canada call centre for the period from 6 March to 5 June 2018 and from 13 June to 10 September 2018. Data was not available for the period from 6 to 12 June 2018.

1.27 **Recommendation.** Employment and Social Development Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada should review how they manage incoming calls to improve access to agents. The departments should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they prefer to wait, use self-service options, or have the call centre call them back later.

**Employment and Social Development Canada's response.** *Agreed. Employment and Social Development Canada's current ability to manage and improve access to a call centre agent is limited by existing technology and funding. Migrations of the Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centres to a modernized telephone system are planned to be completed by May 2020. As each call centre is migrated, the Department will review and adjust how it manages incoming calls to improve access to call centre services. Once the new platform is in place, the Department plans to complete, by March 2021, a full review of options to improve access to agents within the new technology system. This will allow the Department to consider nearly a full year of experience with the new system.*

*The audit scoped out an important component of the Department's call centre strategy: the self-service features available 24/7 to Canadians who call the Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centres. Virtually all callers can access the self-service telephone menu, from which more than half of callers (approximately 20 million in the 2017–18 fiscal year) resolve their issues without needing to speak with an agent.*

**Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's response.** *Agreed. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada continues to work toward improving support to clients and has already taken important steps to achieve this goal. Steps include hiring more agents for the Client Support Centre and putting a process in place to support clients who do not speak English or French and who contact the Client Support Centre using an interpreter. The Department recognizes that many clients now prefer to use self-serve options or to contact the Department via email. As such, the Department is committed to pursuing a multi-channel support strategy to give clients the support they need in the channel of their choice. The Department has taken steps to improve its website and case status tools so clients can self-serve more easily. The Department has also taken steps to offer personalized client support through email and other dedicated avenues for support.*

*In 2018, the Department adopted a three-year strategy to further improve the accessibility and timeliness of the Department's client support. As part of the strategy, the Department sought funding in Budget 2019 and received \$43 million over the next two years to provide the Client Support Centre with the resources required to meet client needs. The strategy includes further improvements to the Client Support Centre. Specific improvements include reviewing training and work processes to ensure*

*that clients receive support in a respectful and efficient manner; offering clients the choice of asking the Client Support Centre to call them back rather than waiting on hold to speak with an agent; resolving some of the issues that lead clients to seek support; ensuring that the Department's programs and services are designed with the client in mind; and setting the foundation for transformation by improving the Department's technology and tools.*

## Call centres were not focused on clients

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### What we found

1.28 We found that call centres were not focused on the needs of their clients when making decisions about call centre services and how they set service standards. The departments' public reporting on their call centre performance sometimes overstated results. We also found that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat did not provide clear direction to departments and agencies in applying the Treasury Board Policy on Service and related guidelines to call centre services.

1.29 Our analysis supporting this finding presents what we examined and discusses the following topics:

- Service to clients
- Setting service standards
- Reporting on performance
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat direction on service

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### Why this finding matters

1.30 This finding matters because many Canadians rely on call centres to obtain important information to make decisions. In addition, callers want to know what they should realistically expect when calling the government, such as the likelihood of reaching an agent and how long they should expect to wait for an agent. It is also important for callers and parliamentarians to know whether these levels of service are calculated in the same way across call centres and whether departments are achieving them.

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### Context

1.31 A service standard is a public commitment to provide a level of service that clients can expect under normal conditions. The Treasury Board Policy on Service and related guidelines identify service standards for

- access, such as the likelihood callers will be able to speak with an agent;
- timeliness, such as how long callers will have to wait to speak with an agent once they are allowed into the queue; and
- accuracy, such as whether callers will receive the correct answers to their questions.

1.32 The Policy on Service and related guidelines state that standards should be relevant to and based on consultation with clients. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is responsible for oversight of and for monitoring federal departments' and agencies' compliance with the policy.

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**Recommendations**

1.33 Our recommendations in this area of examination appear at paragraphs 1.45, 1.46, and 1.47.

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**Analysis to support this finding**

1.34 **What we examined.** We examined whether selected call centres provided client-focused service to their callers, developed client-focused service standards on access and timeliness, and publicly reported results against these service standards. We also examined whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provided guidance and tools to help departments and agencies respect the principles of providing good service to Canadians.

1.35 **Service to clients.** We found that Veterans Affairs Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not always consider the needs of their clients when making decisions about call centre services.

1.36 We found that Veterans Affairs Canada stopped offering a teletypewriter (TTY) service for the deaf and hard of hearing without first consulting with or telling veterans. The Department was not able to provide documentation on the reasons for the decision.

1.37 We found that in 2015, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada directed its agents to not answer general inquiries but instead to tell callers to go to the Department's website for information. This change was due to a higher volume of calls resulting from the Department's closing of its in-person client support offices across Canada in 2012. After the Department stopped answering general inquiries, a number of clients called back repeatedly to try to get the information that they wanted. At the end of 2016, 70% of clients providing online feedback to the Department about the call centre complained about the service. In 2017, the Department resumed answering general inquiries. This change improved client satisfaction but made access and wait times worse. In 2018, the Department began hiring additional call centre agents and started developing strategies to increase access to the call centre.

1.38 We also found that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not adequately implement a House of Commons committee recommendation to make it easier for clients who do not speak English or French to communicate with the call centre through an interpreter. The Department responded to the committee's recommendation by stating that it had a process for clients to bring their own interpreters. However, we found that the Department did not carry out an analysis to reduce the effort required for callers to use their own interpreters or representatives.

1.39 **Setting service standards.** We found that the call centres we examined did not include all three types of service standards identified in the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat’s guidance. None of the call centres we audited had service standards on clients’ likelihood of reaching an agent (access). None had service standards on the accuracy of the answers they provide callers (accuracy), although all had quality monitoring processes to perform some testing of agent responses. Finally, the call centre for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did not have a standard on how long callers would have to wait to speak with an agent once they are in the queue (timeliness) (Exhibit 1.3). Without service standards, callers could not know what level of service they could expect from call centres, and the departments had no public commitments to meet.

**Exhibit 1.3 Call centres did not include all types of service standards identified in Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat guidance**

Call centre	Service standards in place		
	Access	Timeliness	Accuracy
Employment Insurance (Employment and Social Development Canada)	None	80% of calls answered within 10 minutes	None
Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security (Employment and Social Development Canada)	None	80% of calls answered within 10 minutes	None
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada	None	None	None
Veterans Affairs Canada	None	80% of calls answered within 2 minutes	None

1.40 We also found that the departments that had call centre service standards on timeliness could not show that they developed them by considering feedback from clients on wait time expectations. For example, at the time of our audit, Veterans Affairs Canada was considering changing its service standard from answering 80% of calls within two minutes to answering 80% of calls within five minutes. The Department’s analysis supporting the change did not discuss how the change might affect service specifically to veterans and was not based on feedback gathered from veterans.

1.41 **Reporting on performance.** We found that when departments reported on their performance against their call centre service standards, they sometimes overstated their results. For example, when Veterans Affairs Canada reported on its performance against its service standard to answer 80% of calls in 2 minutes, it did not include calls during which the caller hung up in the first 30 seconds after being put into the queue to speak with an agent. Similarly, when Employment and Social Development Canada reported on its performance against its service



standard to answer 80% of calls within 10 minutes, it did not include calls during which the caller hung up after reaching the queue.

1.42 We also found that Employment and Social Development Canada and Veterans Affairs Canada published call centre performance results that were based on unverified data. These departments used reports that were generated by reporting tools that summarized results. However, these departments did not keep source data and as a result could not verify the results of their reports to ensure that the calculations were accurate.

1.43 We wanted to verify the results in these reports, but we could not do so. These departments did not keep their source data, because they did not identify it as having business value. In contrast, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada did keep its source data and used it to verify results. In our opinion, source data about calls is of business value because it is needed to verify calculations of performance results and should be kept as per the Treasury Board Directive on Recordkeeping.

1.44 **Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat direction on service.** We found that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat did not provide clear direction to ensure that departments and agencies respected the principles of good service in the Policy on Service. The Secretariat did not sufficiently monitor whether departments set call centre service standards and whether departments reported accurately on their performance in meeting client needs.

1.45 **Recommendation.** Veterans Affairs Canada should review how it provides access to its call centre by the deaf and hard of hearing and ensure its decisions are based on caller feedback.

*Veterans Affairs Canada's response. Agreed. Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to strive for 100% access to call centre services for all. Through the Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service, the Department provides teletypewriter (TTY) services to those who need psychological support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Department will extend its TTY services to include calls handled by its National Contact Centre Network, which is available from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time. To accomplish this, the Department will consult with internal and external experts, acquire the necessary equipment and/or software, conduct preliminary testing, and then implement the service. Implementation will include promoting the availability of the service internally and externally.*

*Future decisions regarding access to the Department's call centre will be based on caller feedback, including the Department's Client Satisfaction Survey data.*

1.46 **Recommendation.** Employment and Social Development Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; and Veterans Affairs Canada should

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

**Employment and Social Development Canada's response.** *Agreed. Employment and Social Development Canada agrees that service standards need to be relevant to clients and consider client feedback. In this regard, the Department completed an Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security program service standard review in December 2018 that included client consultations, confirming that established standards are relevant and generally consistent with client expectations.*

*Aligned with industry best practices, the Department also actively monitors call centres' accessibility and accuracy performance metrics. The Department will continue to set service standards that are relevant to clients in accordance with the Policy on Service.*

*The Department also agrees to enhance its publishing of call centre service standards and performance results through more frequent reporting. Furthermore, the Department has verified the accuracy of its reporting methods using source data, demonstrating that the current summarized reporting method is accurate within plus or minus 0.05%. The Department will continue to periodically verify data validity going forward.*

*In its 2019–20 reported results, the Department will start to include all calls that hang up after the service standard time frame has elapsed. The Department, however, notes that these calls would not have a material impact on its reported results. For example, in the 2017–18 fiscal year, these calls represented 1% of total calls.*

**Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's response.** *Agreed. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has published service standards for many of its programs and services, and the Department is committed to continuous improvement in this area. The Department is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of its service standards to ensure that they are meaningful to clients and achievable by the Department. In addition, the Department plans to establish service standards in 2019 for client support services. These service standards will be set in consultation with clients and in consideration of resource capacity.*

**Veterans Affairs Canada's response.** Agreed. Veterans Affairs Canada is looking at how it can use its ongoing post-call survey to measure client satisfaction related to service standards. As part of the Department's ongoing commitment to provide quality service, future changes to service standards will be considered, as required, based on client feedback. The Department will, on an annual basis, take into consideration its performance in conjunction with the results of its client surveys to inform future potential changes to the published service standards.

Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to publishing its service standards, associated service standard results, and data sets on [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) and [open.canada.ca](http://open.canada.ca) (Open Government Portal). This will be done in conjunction with the release of the Departmental Results Report in November each year, starting in 2019. The Department will implement an approach to confirm the accuracy of published performance results by November 2019.

**1.47 Recommendation.** The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat should clarify direction on call centre services and lead departments and agencies to help ensure that

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

**The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's response.** Agreed. By April 2020, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat will identify potential changes to policy instruments to improve service standards for all service delivery channels, including call centres. The Secretariat will also continue to work with service delivery departments and enhance existing guidance on the development and publication of client-centric service standards.

## The future of call centres

### The modernization and improvement of call centre services will take years

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#### What we found

**1.48** We found that Shared Services Canada and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat did not provide the support needed to modernize and improve call centre services. At the end of our audit, five years after the federal government began to modernize the technology for all of its 221 call centres, the initiative was rolling out to only 8. This initiative was intended to consolidate the aging call centres on a single modern system that would provide a number of improvements, including new features. However, we found that the department responsible for the

initiative, Shared Services Canada, had yet to finalize a plan to modernize the remaining 213 call centres.

1.49 We also found that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat developed a government-wide service strategy that prioritized providing services online. However, the strategy did not mention the modernization of call centres.

1.50 Our analysis supporting this finding presents what we examined and discusses the following topics:

- Modernizing call centre technology
- Government-wide service strategy

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### Why this finding matters

1.51 This finding matters because modern technology would help improve call centre service and provide Canadians with a consistent experience at all federal government call centres. Until the technology is implemented, call centres face the risk of service interruptions or outages because of their aging systems. In addition, the current call centres cannot offer Canadians new, more efficient call centre features. These include such features as allowing callers to hang up and receive a call back from an agent and allowing callers to do self-service transactions, such as changing their addresses and banking information.

1.52 This finding also matters because unless the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat includes call centres in its government-wide approach to services, the modernization initiative will focus only on solving the problem of aging call centre technology—not on meeting the needs of Canadians.

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### Context

1.53 In 2011, Shared Services Canada was mandated to transform the federal government's information technology infrastructure, including call centres. In 2013, the Department identified the need to manage the risk that aging call centre infrastructure could fail and the need to improve call centre technology to meet Canadians' expectations. Shared Services Canada's plan was to modernize call centre technology on a common new system, for all the call centres across the federal government, by 2020.

1.54 In 2015, the President of the Treasury Board was mandated to develop a new service strategy that aims to create a single online window for all government services. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat received \$6 million over five fiscal years (2016–17 to 2020–21) and \$800,000 a year to develop a client-focused service strategy and establish new performance standards.

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### Recommendation

1.55 Our recommendation in this area of examination appears at paragraph 1.63.

1.56 **What we examined.** We examined whether Shared Services Canada developed and implemented an initiative to modernize the technology of call centres across government. We examined whether the initiative met the needs of departments and agencies to improve their call centre services. We also examined whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat had a government-wide client service strategy that included call centres.

1.57 **Modernizing call centre technology.** We found that although Shared Services Canada had an initiative to modernize departmental call centres, it was delayed by years because Shared Services Canada underestimated the cost and amount of work needed to implement the project.

1.58 The initiative began in 2013, but Shared Services Canada did not sign the contract to develop a new system until 2015 and then amended the contract in 2017 before work could begin. This delay caused problems for some call centres. For example, Employment and Social Development Canada was waiting for the new system in order to address technology limitations that would help the Department answer callers more efficiently. Additionally, Employment and Social Development Canada told us it delayed major improvements to its call centres for Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security because it did not want to update its existing system when it was expecting to move to the new one. In the meantime, the Department's 20-year-old call centre technology continued to be at risk of breaking down because it was no longer supported and replacement parts were difficult to find, and callers had to wait for improved features.

1.59 In 2017, the modernization initiative was delayed again when Shared Services Canada realized that it would be too expensive to move all 221 call centres over to the new system by 2020. Instead, the Department decided to bring call centres onto the new system in two phases. The first phase was to roll out the new system by 2018 to only 8 large call centres, and the second phase was to focus on the remaining 213.

1.60 We found that Shared Services Canada underestimated the amount of work needed to prepare departments and agencies to move to the new call centre system, which also resulted in delays. For example, the new system had a number of advanced features, such as the ability to handle more calls and to record calls for quality monitoring purposes. However, in order for departments and agencies to use these features, Shared Services Canada had to upgrade its existing information technology infrastructure—a task it overlooked during planning. System defects also created delays. For example, use of the system in both official languages as well as built-in features to ensure accessibility for call centre agents with visual impairments had defects that needed to be corrected. These delays pushed the first phase end date to 2020.

1.61 We found that Shared Services Canada had not yet finalized a plan for modernizing the remaining 213 call centres. The Department had compiled an inventory of Government of Canada call centres, but it was incomplete because the Department had not yet confirmed the total number of call centres or consulted with departments to determine their business needs. The Department also had not yet determined the scheduling and costing for modernizing the remaining call centres. While these call centres wait for modern technology, they face the risk of aging hardware breaking down and software being no longer supported. For example, Veterans Affairs Canada's current call centre contract will expire in December 2020, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's contract will expire in March 2022.

1.62 **Government-wide service strategy.** We found that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat developed a government-wide service strategy in 2017: the Government of Canada Clients First Service Strategy. The strategy prioritized providing services online but did not include call centres or mention the government-wide modernization of call centres, despite the fact that they continue to be an important way for clients to get information.

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

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

***The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's response.** Agreed. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat will include all service delivery channels, including call centres, as part of its government-wide approach to supporting departments and agencies in improving services.*

***Shared Services Canada's response.** Agreed. After it was determined that "one size does not fit all" due to the high cost of implementing a full-featured, highly available, and secure solution, Shared Services Canada started to reassess its plan to determine the "best-fit" solution for the remaining contact centres that do not require this level of functionality. Shared Services Canada determined there are different tiers of contact centres (based on business requirements) and is currently working with partners to update the contact centre inventory and requirements, which will support the identification of the best-fit and most cost-effective solutions for modernizing the remaining contact centres. The target completion for this analysis is the first quarter of the 2019–20 fiscal year, at which point Shared Services Canada will present the updated plan to the Treasury Board and ensure alignment with a whole-of-government approach to digital services.*

## Conclusion

1.64 We concluded that not all of the departments we audited provided callers with accessible and timely call centre services. The way in which call centres set service standards and measured and reported on performance against service standards was not relevant to clients, transparent, consistent, and based on data that was verified for accuracy.

1.65 We also concluded that Shared Services Canada did not provide support to modernize federal government call centre systems. Although Shared Services Canada was rolling out a new system for 8 call centres, the initiative was taking longer than expected, and the Department had yet to finalize a plan to modernize the remaining 213 call centres.

1.66 Finally, we concluded that the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provided a government-wide service strategy that prioritized improvements to online services. However, the strategy did not mention the modernization of call centres and did not provide clear direction to support departments and agencies in reporting on their call centre performance in a way that was relevant to clients, transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy. The Secretariat also did not provide a government-wide approach to ensuring that call centre services were available for clients when they wished to call the government.

## About the Audit

This independent assurance report was prepared by the Office of the Auditor General of Canada on selected departments' call centres. Our responsibility was to provide objective information, advice, and assurance to assist Parliament in its scrutiny of the government's management of resources and programs, and to conclude on whether the federal organizations complied in all significant respects with the applicable criteria.

All work in this audit was performed to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard for Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements set out by the Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada (CPA Canada) in the CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance.

The Office applies Canadian Standard on Quality Control 1 and, accordingly, maintains a comprehensive system of quality control, including documented policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements.

In conducting the audit work, we have complied with the independence and other ethical requirements of the relevant rules of professional conduct applicable to the practice of public accounting in Canada, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

In accordance with our regular audit process, we obtained the following from entity management:

- confirmation of management's responsibility for the subject under audit;
- acknowledgement of the suitability of the criteria used in the audit;
- confirmation that all known information that has been requested, or that could affect the findings or audit conclusion, has been provided; and
- confirmation that the audit report is factually accurate.

### Audit objective

The objective of this audit was to determine whether selected departments provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services and whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada provided a strategy and support to enable these services.

### Scope and approach

We selected call centres from the following departments, using a targeted testing approach, because of the importance of the service that the call centres provide to clients and because the call centres handle a range of call volumes:

- Employment and Social Development Canada (Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security);
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; and
- Veterans Affairs Canada.



We conducted a site visit to one location for each of the call centres selected.

In conducting our data analysis, we reviewed how departments managed call volumes to provide access for callers to the call centres. We also analyzed data from the toll-free network service provider and from departmental call centre systems to understand callers' access to both the automated self-service system and agents. We calculated a number of performance indicators, including how many calls were prevented from connecting to an agent and abandoned by the caller (hung up), and how long callers waited to speak with an agent. We reviewed how departments measured and reported on client satisfaction and understood client needs. We also reviewed call centre service improvement initiatives and activities conducted by the departments.

We reviewed how departments developed their service standards. We also reviewed all public reporting on service standards. Furthermore, we reviewed the procedures that departments carried out to gain assurance over the integrity of the data supporting their public reporting.

We examined whether Shared Services Canada developed and implemented a plan to modernize the technology of call centres across government and whether it met the needs of departments and agencies that provided service. We also examined whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat had a strategy to enable call centre services.

This audit work included document reviews and interviews with Department officials.

We did not examine the funding of call centres or whether call centre agents or the automated self-service systems gave callers accurate information.

## Criteria

Criteria	Sources
<b>To determine whether selected departments provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services and whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada provided a strategy and support to enable these services, we used the following criteria:</b>	
<p>Selected departments identify and monitor their clients' call centre needs.</p> <p>Selected departments provide accessible and timely call centre services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Mandate Letter, 2016</li> <li>• Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Mandate Letter, 2017</li> <li>• President of the Treasury Board of Canada Mandate Letter, 2015</li> <li>• Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Mandate Letter, 2015 and 2017</li> <li>• Policy on Service, Treasury Board</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Standards, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Management, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> </ul>

Criteria	Sources
<p><b>To determine whether selected departments provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services and whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada provided a strategy and support to enable these services, we used the following criteria: (continued)</b></p>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service Strategy (2016), Employment and Social Development Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015–2018), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015), Veterans Affairs Canada</li> <li>• Citizens First reports, Institute for Citizen-Centred Service</li> </ul>
<p>Selected departments develop client-focused service standards.</p> <p>Selected departments measure performance results and use them for service improvement.</p> <p>Selected departments publish transparent performance results and compare them with service standards.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Mandate Letter, 2016</li> <li>• Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Mandate Letter, 2017</li> <li>• President of the Treasury Board of Canada Mandate Letter, 2015</li> <li>• Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Mandate Letter, 2015 and 2017</li> <li>• Policy on Service, Treasury Board</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Standards, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Management, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Service Strategy (2016), Employment and Social Development Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015–2018), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015), Veterans Affairs Canada</li> </ul>

Criteria	Sources
<p><b>To determine whether selected departments provided clients with accessible and timely call centre services and whether the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada provided a strategy and support to enable these services, we used the following criteria: (continued)</b></p>	
<p>The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat has a strategy that includes call centres, and it has communicated the strategy to Shared Services Canada and selected departments.</p> <p>The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat provides guidance and tools to help departments implement a consistent approach to providing call centre services across the Government of Canada.</p> <p>Shared Services Canada has a transformation plan for call centres that supports the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's and departments' service strategies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Mandate Letter, 2016</li> <li>• Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Mandate Letter, 2017</li> <li>• President of the Treasury Board of Canada Mandate Letter, 2015</li> <li>• Minister of Veterans Affairs and Associate Minister of National Defence Mandate Letter, 2015 and 2017</li> <li>• Policy on Service, Treasury Board</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Management, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Guideline on Service Standards, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Directive on Management of Information Technology, Treasury Board</li> <li>• Government of Canada Strategic Plan for Information Management and Information Technology 2017 to 2021, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat</li> <li>• Government of Canada Service Strategy</li> <li>• GC IT Transformation Plan 2017–2025, Shared Services Canada</li> <li>• Service Strategy (2016), Employment and Social Development Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015–2018), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015–2018), Shared Services Canada</li> <li>• Service Management Strategy (2015), Veterans Affairs Canada</li> </ul>

## Period covered by the audit

The audit analyzed the call centre data for

- Employment and Social Development Canada call centres for Employment Insurance and for the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security for the period from July 2018 to January 2019;
- the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada call centre for the period from January to August 2018; and
- the Veterans Affairs Canada call centre for the period from 6 March to 5 June 2018 and from 13 June to 10 September 2018. Data was not available for the period from 6 to 12 June 2018.

We audited the supporting documentation related to the call centres for the period from 1 April 2010 to 21 November 2018 and the documentation related to the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat and Shared Services Canada for the period from 1 April 2012 to 21 November 2018.

These are the periods to which the audit conclusion applies.

## Date of the report

We obtained sufficient and appropriate audit evidence on which to base our conclusion on 16 January 2019, in Ottawa, Canada.

## Audit team

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# List of Recommendations

The following table lists the recommendations and responses found in this report. The paragraph number preceding the recommendation indicates the location of the recommendation in the report, and the numbers in parentheses indicate the location of the related discussion.

Recommendation	Response
<p><b>Call centre performance</b></p> <p><b>1.27</b> Employment and Social Development Canada and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada should review how they manage incoming calls to improve access to agents. The departments should consider practices such as allowing callers to decide if they prefer to wait, use self-service options, or have the call centre call them back later. <b>(1.16–1.26)</b></p>	<p><b>Employment and Social Development Canada’s response.</b> Agreed. Employment and Social Development Canada’s current ability to manage and improve access to a call centre agent is limited by existing technology and funding. Migrations of the Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centres to a modernized telephone system are planned to be completed by May 2020. As each call centre is migrated, the Department will review and adjust how it manages incoming calls to improve access to call centre services. Once the new platform is in place, the Department plans to complete, by March 2021, a full review of options to improve access to agents within the new technology system. This will allow the Department to consider nearly a full year of experience with the new system.</p> <p>The audit scoped out an important component of the Department’s call centre strategy: the self-service features available 24/7 to Canadians who call the Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security call centres. Virtually all callers can access the self-service telephone menu, from which more than half of callers (approximately 20 million in the 2017–18 fiscal year) resolve their issues without needing to speak with an agent.</p> <p><b>Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’s response.</b> Agreed. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada continues to work toward improving support to clients and has already taken important steps to achieve this goal. Steps include hiring more agents for the Client Support Centre and putting a process in place to support clients who do not speak English or French and who contact the Client Support Centre using an interpreter. The Department recognizes that many clients now prefer to use self-serve options or to contact the Department via email. As such, the Department is committed to pursuing a multi-channel support strategy to give clients the support they need in the channel of their choice. The Department has taken steps to improve its website and case status tools so clients can self-serve more easily. The Department has also taken steps to offer personalized client support through email and other dedicated avenues for support.</p> <p>In 2018, the Department adopted a three-year strategy to further improve the accessibility and timeliness of the Department’s client support. As part of the strategy, the Department sought funding in</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p><b>1.45</b> Veterans Affairs Canada should review how it provides access to its call centre by the deaf and hard of hearing and ensure its decisions are based on caller feedback. <b>(1.35–1.36)</b></p>	<p>Budget 2019 and received \$43 million over the next two years to provide the Client Support Centre with the resources required to meet client needs. The strategy includes further improvements to the Client Support Centre. Specific improvements include reviewing training and work processes to ensure that clients receive support in a respectful and efficient manner; offering clients the choice of asking the Client Support Centre to call them back rather than waiting on hold to speak with an agent; resolving some of the issues that lead clients to seek support; ensuring that the Department’s programs and services are designed with the client in mind; and setting the foundation for transformation by improving the Department’s technology and tools.</p> <p><b>Veterans Affairs Canada’s response.</b> Agreed. Veterans Affairs Canada will continue to strive for 100% access to call centre services for all. Through the Veterans Affairs Canada Assistance Service, the Department provides teletypewriter (TTY) services to those who need psychological support 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The Department will extend its TTY services to include calls handled by its National Contact Centre Network, which is available from Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time. To accomplish this, the Department will consult with internal and external experts, acquire the necessary equipment and/or software, conduct preliminary testing, and then implement the service. Implementation will include promoting the availability of the service internally and externally.</p> <p>Future decisions regarding access to the Department’s call centre will be based on caller feedback, including the Department’s Client Satisfaction Survey data.</p>
<p><b>1.46</b> Employment and Social Development Canada; Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; and Veterans Affairs Canada should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• set call centre service standards that are relevant to clients and consider client feedback as per the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Guideline on Service Standards, and</li> <li>• publish call centre service standards and performance results in a transparent and consistent manner and verify the results to confirm accuracy.</li> </ul> <p><b>(1.39–1.43)</b></p>	<p><b>Employment and Social Development Canada’s response.</b> Agreed. Employment and Social Development Canada agrees that service standards need to be relevant to clients and consider client feedback. In this regard, the Department completed an Employment Insurance and Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security program service standard review in December 2018 that included client consultations, confirming that established standards are relevant and generally consistent with client expectations.</p> <p>Aligned with industry best practices, the Department also actively monitors call centres’ accessibility and accuracy performance metrics. The Department will continue to set service standards that are relevant to clients in accordance with the Policy on Service.</p> <p>The Department also agrees to enhance its publishing of call centre service standards and performance results through more frequent reporting. Furthermore, the Department has verified the accuracy of its reporting methods using source data, demonstrating that the current summarized reporting method is accurate within plus or minus 0.05%. The Department will continue to periodically verify data validity going forward.</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p><b>1.47</b> The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat should clarify direction on call centre services and lead departments and agencies to help ensure that</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• their call centre service standards follow the Treasury Board's policies on service, with emphasis on relevance to clients, consistency across government, and transparency; and</li> <li>• they publish call centre service standards and performance results that are transparent, consistent, and verified to confirm accuracy.</li> </ul> <p><b>(1.28–1.44)</b></p>	<p>In its 2019–20 reported results, the Department will start to include all calls that hang up after the service standard time frame has elapsed. The Department, however, notes that these calls would not have a material impact on its reported results. For example, in the 2017–18 fiscal year, these calls represented 1% of total calls.</p> <p><b>Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's response.</b> Agreed. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has published service standards for many of its programs and services, and the Department is committed to continuous improvement in this area. The Department is currently undertaking a comprehensive review of its service standards to ensure that they are meaningful to clients and achievable by the Department. In addition, the Department plans to establish service standards in 2019 for client support services. These service standards will be set in consultation with clients and in consideration of resource capacity.</p> <p><b>Veterans Affairs Canada's response.</b> Agreed. Veterans Affairs Canada is looking at how it can use its ongoing post-call survey to measure client satisfaction related to service standards. As part of the Department's ongoing commitment to provide quality service, future changes to service standards will be considered, as required, based on client feedback. The Department will, on an annual basis, take into consideration its performance in conjunction with the results of its client surveys to inform future potential changes to the published service standards.</p> <p>Veterans Affairs Canada is committed to publishing its service standards, associated service standard results, and data sets on <a href="http://veterans.gc.ca">veterans.gc.ca</a> and <a href="http://open.canada.ca">open.canada.ca</a> (Open Government Portal). This will be done in conjunction with the release of the Departmental Results Report in November each year, starting in 2019. The Department will implement an approach to confirm the accuracy of published performance results by November 2019.</p> <p><b>The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's response.</b> Agreed. By April 2020, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat will identify potential changes to policy instruments to improve service standards for all service delivery channels, including call centres. The Secretariat will also continue to work with service delivery departments and enhance existing guidance on the development and publication of client-centric service standards.</p>

Recommendation	Response
<p><b>The future of call centres</b></p> <p><b>1.63</b> The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat should include call centres as part of its government-wide approach to services. Shared Services Canada, as part of its initiative to modernize the remaining Government of Canada call centres, should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consult with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat to ensure the modernization initiative is in line with the Secretariat’s government-wide approach to services, and</li> <li>• ensure the initiative includes a complete inventory of call centres and the business needs of departments and agencies.</li> </ul> <p><b>(1.48–1.62)</b></p>	<p><b>The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat’s response.</b> Agreed. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat will include all service delivery channels, including call centres, as part of its government-wide approach to supporting departments and agencies in improving services.</p> <p><b>Shared Services Canada’s response.</b> Agreed. After it was determined that “one size does not fit all” due to the high cost of implementing a full-featured, highly available, and secure solution, Shared Services Canada started to reassess its plan to determine the “best-fit” solution for the remaining contact centres that do not require this level of functionality. Shared Services Canada determined there are different tiers of contact centres (based on business requirements) and is currently working with partners to update the contact centre inventory and requirements, which will support the identification of the best-fit and most cost-effective solutions for modernizing the remaining contact centres. The target completion for this analysis is the first quarter of the 2019–20 fiscal year, at which point Shared Services Canada will present the updated plan to the Treasury Board and ensure alignment with a whole-of-government approach to digital services.</p>









Spring 2019

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to the Parliament of Canada**

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