

# PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

## The Police Assistance Line

### Follow-up of 2003 Performance Audit NSW Police

#### About the audit

Contact centres are increasingly used by the private sector and government organisations to enable standardised processing, better matching of staffing levels to contacts, and monitoring of service quality.

The Police Assistance Line (PAL - 131444) is available 24-hours a day, seven days a week for reporting minor crimes and non-urgent incidents. It is operated by a contact centre. Its primary objective is to provide an alternative point of contact to local police so as to release them for frontline duty. On average the PAL answers around 1300 calls and takes around 650 incident reports a day, which it records onto the NSW Police crime database.

We audited the Police Assistance Line in 2003. This follow-up audit answers two key questions:

- Is the PAL now performing better?
- Is the contact centre which operates the PAL now better managed?

Since our last audit, the contact centre which operates the PAL has taken on responsibility for the Police switchboard and around 70 per cent of Triple Zero calls. Whilst outside the scope of this audit, this has expanded significantly the centre's role.

#### Audit opinion

In this 2006 follow-up audit, we found that NSW Police had addressed most of the key areas for improvement we identified in 2003.

The contact centre which operates the PAL is well managed, and has implemented several improvements since our 2003 audit.

The centre's speed in answering and handling PAL calls is better than in 2003. Caller satisfaction with PAL services is high, and NSW Police calculate it releases 200 police for frontline duty. The centre also receives around 4,000 enquiry calls each week further reducing the load on local police.

Whilst the time taken to answer calls by the PAL is less than in 2002-03, it has increased recently. The explanation seems to be lower than required staffing levels due to higher than anticipated attrition rates, and delays and difficulties in recruiting staff.

When it does not have enough staff the centre gives priority to Triple Zero calls, which increases the time taken to answer PAL calls. While this is appropriate risk management, it should not become the norm and NSW Police needs to resource the centre so it can achieve both Triple Zero and PAL targets. This may require more resources and greater use of automated, self-service technologies to achieve further efficiencies.

NSW Police also needs to promote the PAL more, both in the community and with local police. Only about half the reports of less serious crime are made to the PAL, with the rest to local police. This is the same as in 2002. The greater the proportion of such reports made to the PAL, the more police will be released for frontline duty.

NSW Police should also continue to review its other telephony services to see if the centre could provide those services more efficiently.





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Internet site: [www.audit.nsw.gov.au](http://www.audit.nsw.gov.au)

## Key findings

### Is the PAL performing better?

The contact centre's performance in answering PAL calls has improved. The average time to answer calls, percentage of calls answered within 27 seconds and PAL call abandonment rates are all better than in 2002-03. In particular, the call centre has met its target of answering 80 per cent of PAL calls in 27 seconds in each of the last three years although there have been some days and months where it has not done so.

The contact centre's average handling time for calls to the PAL has also fallen, but we can not be sure whether this represents improved performance. To illustrate, more detailed requirements for recording break and enter incidents have increased the handling time for such calls, but conversely the PAL is now required to respond to non-urgent alarm calls which take less time to process than the average call.

While time to answer calls is better than in 2002-03, it increased in 2005-06. NSW Police advise that this is due to a shortage of staff taking calls resulting from higher than expected attrition rates and difficulties and delays recruiting new staff. NSW Police may have also underestimated the resources needed to meet consistently both Triple Zero and PAL call answering targets. It is reviewing the centre's workload and resource requirements.

The centre's independent annual caller survey found caller satisfaction is more than 90 per cent.

NSW Police calculates that about 200 police were released to frontline duty by the PAL in 2005-06. This is below the number NSW Police expected the PAL to release.

### Has contact centre management improved?

The contact centre has a suite of indicators covering efficiency, timeliness, quality and caller satisfaction. It has a target for PAL call answering, but could establish benchmarks or targets for other aspects of performance.

The centre has systems which assure the quality of information and advice given to callers, the accuracy and completeness of crime recording, and efficiency of staff. It has mechanisms to obtain feedback from local police on their satisfaction with the PAL, but these could be stronger and more formal. It also participates in a range of forums where it exchanges experience and knowledge with other contact centre managers.

The centre is also providing more services through email and the internet than in 2003. It would like to use these technologies more, but is reportedly constrained by NSW Police's mainframe computer system.

NSW Police could better quantify savings arising from transferring call handling to the centre. This is important for both accountability and to inform its decisions about what other telephony business should be transferred to the centre.

NSW Police should do more to promote the PAL to enable the release of more police for frontline duties. At present, it takes about half of all reports of less serious crime, with the rest going to local police. This is about the same as the level reported in our 2003 audit.

NSW Police reports PAL performance on its website for the previous week, but should also provide long term data in its annual report to help Parliament and the public better assess the PAL's performance.