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Evaluation study on the future of the Europe Direct Contact Centre



Final report



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Executive summary

The Europe Direct Contact Centre (EDCC) is a contact centre service operated by the European Commission. The EDCC provides information to citizens and other groups via telephone, email and messenger services. It responds to enquiries on any EU-related topic in any official EU language. The functions of the EDCC are undertaken by a service provider selected every five years. DG COMM manages the contract and monitors its implementation.

The aim of this study is to support DG COMM, in the development of the EDCC, informing the strategy and future call for tender for a new framework contract to deliver the EDCC in the years 2025-2030. Rather than to provide an evaluation of the EDCC the study is principally forward looking. Data collection and analysis covered five themes:

- Trends in national governmental contact centre services
- Trends in the private contact centre profession
- Quality and usefulness of the EDCC services
- Performance of the current pricing structure
- Collaboration structures between the EDCC and the corresponding services in the European Parliament and the Council

Key findings

Operational performance compared

When considering operational performance¹ and HR metrics², EDCC demonstrates superior or comparable performance to public and private contact centres. Talk time is similar to that of other public and private contact centres. Email response time is slightly higher for the EDCC compared to similar services.

The number of number of enquiries handled annually per agent is lower than comparators, and the EDCC cost per interaction is higher. Additionally, EDCC talk time / post-call activity differ significantly from other public contact centre operations.

Overall, in view of the comparatively strong performance of the EDCC, there does not appear to be obvious opportunities for EDCC to improve the quality of its operational performance. Nor is there evidence to support tightening of targets set for the operational metrics monitored. However, there are opportunities to reduce the time spent on post-call work and for decreasing the time spent per email and chat enquiry. There are also lessons to be learned as regards the use of the knowledge generated to improve information services.

Information channels

Phone remains the dominant channel for contact centres in the public and private sectors and is expected to stay the preferred choice for incoming enquiries in the foreseeable future. However, the contact centre industry as a whole has seen a movement away from telephony and towards digital channels, with improvement and development of self-service options seen as a priority.

¹ Average speed to answer, call abandonment and first-contact resolution rate

² Agent attrition rate and agent absence

Phone is positively associated with high First Time Resolution (FTR) rates and high user satisfaction. In contrast, email performs lower on both indicators. Web chat has the advantage over email of being a synchronous channel, with higher satisfaction and higher FTR. The use of webchat, however, is much more widespread in the private sector than in the public sector. Use of social media channels to engage with citizens is not widespread in the private sector and is marginal in the public sector. Within the latter, there are widespread concerns related to privacy and data protection.

Compared to the trends in the contact centre industry, EDCC shows a different pattern in channel usage. The EDCC receive higher rates of mail (70%), lower rates of telephone (25%) and higher rates of messaging (5%). Email and phone are likely to remain the dominant channels for the EDCC in the foreseeable future. However, there is some appetite for social media and chat among current EDCC users.

Use of Artificial Intelligence in knowledge management and service delivery

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a wide-ranging term for technology solutions which appears to emulate human cognitive capabilities through the 'understanding' of complex, natural language requirements, in order to reach its own conclusions and develop itself based on what works and what doesn't. The key types of AI-enabled solutions currently used in the contact centre industry include chatbots, AI-enabled agent assistance, QA monitoring and workforce management, predictive customer analytics, predictive call routing, sentiment analysis and automated translation. Among the centres consulted, examples of all the above uses of AI were identified. However, the maturity of AI implementation varies across the industry, with, nevertheless, expectations of rapid adoption.

Accepting the high average time spend on EDCC enquiries, there are apparent opportunities to enhance efficiency in enquiry handling using AI. AI-generated post-call notes and automated call classification could help reduce the time spent on post-call work, which accounts for 65% of the overall phone interaction time. Further opportunities relate to the use of AI natural language understanding to emails, automated information retrieval applied to the knowledge base, automated translation and AI powered suggestions for replies. AI can also be used to update knowledge bases on an ongoing and cumulatively beneficial basis, gathering information from customer surveys as to which responses have been most successful for citizens.

It is the contractor's estimate that the effective implementation of such tools could drive down handling time beyond the estimates/targets set for efficiency gains under the current contact for implementation of AI features on the EDCC knowledge base.

Quality of the EDCC replies

Citizens who have contacted the EDCC have found the service helpful. Across the channels the EDCC generates a good satisfaction score. Satisfaction is highest for phone enquiries and lowest for email enquiries. This finding reflects industry trends, where phone calls are associated with higher satisfaction, email with lower.

The EDCC service performs relatively better on form and speed of reply, and less well on the quality of reply. When users are dissatisfied, lack of perceived relevance of the reply is the main reason.

Satisfaction with the information provided is higher when questions relate to the EDCC's core activities covering EU information, grants or rights as an EU citizen. It is lower when the enquiry expresses an opinion, when the request relates to a specific document or a complaint or when

the enquiry relates to a technical matter. Satisfaction is also higher for top EDCC topics, and lower for many of less covered topics.

For the vast majority of EDCC users, contact to the EDCC is a step on the way, towards other activities or research. At least 70% of the respondents, across channels, consider further research, intent to contact other actors or the EDCC again, or undertake other steps. Data, however, also demonstrate that satisfied users are more inclined to think that other steps are unnecessary.

Overall, greater tailoring of written replies has the largest potential to improve client satisfaction. Improvement in this area, however, may involve greater costs, as it is likely to be associated with more interpretation of information.

Finally, while the overall high level of satisfaction is underlined, it must be noted, that the current satisfaction KPI provides a distorted picture of overall satisfaction. There is therefore a need to review the calculation model for user satisfaction, using the standard formula for Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT), rather than the current calculation model.

Cooperation between the EDCC and the corresponding services in other main EU institutions

The Council and the European Parliament each provide enquiry services to the public, which operate differently from the EDCC. Unlike the EDCC, enquiries sent to the Council and the European Parliament are dealt with internally and are managed by dedicated units within the institutions. The Council and in the European Parliament deal with a sizable number of enquiries annually, albeit numbers are much smaller than those of the EDCC.

There is a level of overlap in the type of questions received by the three services – but also a significant share of questions that are specific to the different institutions. The EDCC offers more channels, commits to shorter response time, and has more advanced knowledge systems in place.

Transfers from the EDCC to the Council and the Parliament's enquiry services are guided by escalation guidelines. Transfers from the Council or Parliament's enquiry services are not governed by guidelines, and there is variation in the approach taken to transfers. Generally, partner services consider that current collaboration works well. However, this does not translate into a desire for change towards closer collaboration, or a desire to work toward a single access point. There are several obstacles to closer collaboration – and in particular to a joint first stop shop. At an operational level however, enquiry transfers could likely be facilitated by greater levels of transparency and access to the questions and answers provided.

Recommendations

In view of the above conclusions we have organised our recommendations into priority recommendations, which would need to be considered before the DG COMM launch a new tendering procedure, and aspects which merit attention but are of secondary importance.

Our top three recommendations are as follows:

- Undertake an audit of previously raised invoice data and Management Information data which is being produced and operational staffing/productivity
- Review the Standard Operating Model of the current operation before going to tender
- Replace the current charging mechanism, with a more transparent contract and charging mechanism to ensure value for the Commission services and citizens.

The latter would include both a review of the KPI regime and the reward structure, as further presented in section 8.

Additionally, DG COMM could also benefit from:

- A market review and identification of potential suppliers
- Close monitoring of the efficiency and impact of the AI features which are currently being developed and implemented by the EDCC and
- Improvement in the reporting to back offices, so that data may be used to heighten the quality of information made available to citizens online

1 Introduction

This is the Final Report for Study on the **Evaluation study on the future of the Europe Direct Contact Centre** (Request for service COMM/07/2023/Lot3).

The study was commissioned by DG COMM in April 2024. The study is undertaken under the Framework Contract between Technopolis Group and DG COMM, COMM/2020/OP/0020-Provision for Impact Assessment, Evaluations and Evaluation-related studies and services in the field of Communication – Lot-3.

The research was carried out by a team of experts drawn from Henningsen Consulting, Technopolis Group, Contact Babel and The Knowledge Group. For this report:

- Henningsen Consulting took the lead of Strand 1 (Trends in public sector enquiry services); Strand 3 (Quality and usefulness of EDCC replies); and Strand 5 (Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions) working in close collaboration with Technopolis Group
- ContactBabel, a leading research and analysis firm for the contact centre industry, provided the evidence base for Strand 2 (Trends in the contact centre profession) and was lead responsible for the analysis undertaken as part of this Strand,
- The Knowledge Group (tkg), a strategic Business Process Outsourcing advisor, took the lead of Strand 4 (Pricing structure) providing the Contract and Invoicing Health Checks

The study was led by Henningsen Consulting. All partners provided inputs into data collection, study design, conclusions and recommendations.

1.1 Overview of the report

The Final Report is organised as follows:

- The remaining part of this section presents a recap of the objectives and scope of the study as well as a presentation of the EDCC
- Section 2 presents the methodological approach to the study and the work undertaken
- Section 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 present the study findings
- Section 8 provides the conclusions and recommendations

Several appendices are attached to the report:

- Appendix A: Mapping of EDCC performance data, KPI compliance and EDCC costs
- Appendix B: EDCC Benchmarking with industry performance data
- Appendix C: Review of EU citizens usage of social media and messenger apps
- Appendix D: List of interviewees
- Appendix E: Survey questionnaire (expanded user survey)

1.2 Objectives and scope of the study

The aim of this study is to support the European Commission, DG COMM, in the development of the Europe Direct Contact Centre (EDCC), informing the strategy and future call for tender for a new Framework Contract to deliver the EDCC in the years 2025-2030.

The study is principally forward looking. It focuses on selected themes, several of which involve benchmarking with, and learning from, public and private sector contact centre practices. As specified by the tender the study covers five main Strands:

- Research of governmental contact centre services in the EU Member States. This Strand reviews objectives, thematic coverage, organisational structures, and foundations of these, to benchmark the EDCC to these services
- Research of trends in the contact centre profession, including (but not limited to) trends in consumer interactions, offer and consumer preferences and use of artificial Intelligence in knowledge management, and service delivery
- Gather information on perceived quality and usefulness of the EDCC services, how services are used and how enquiry services could be improved going forward
- Assess the performance of the current pricing structure, the relative efficiency and economic advantage for the Commission, and provide guidance on how the pricing structure could be further improved or optimised to maximise the cost-effectiveness of the service
- Review current collaboration structures between the EDCC and the corresponding services in the European Parliament and the Council, and identify, if and how this collaboration could be improved

1.3 Scope of the study

The study period covers the period 2021-2023. The scope of the study covers the EDCC, as implemented under the current contract with the ESN as the lead partner. However, not all aspects are considered by the study. Back-office collaboration and interaction with DG COMM is outside the scope. Likewise, questions related to wider relevance of the service, coordination and coherence with other EC information, guidance and advisory networks is outside of the study remit. Only the EDCC's collaboration with the European Parliament's "Ask EP" and The Council Public Information Service have been considered.

Questions of effectiveness and efficiency are central to the study. However, it is in the context of benchmarking and external comparison – as well as quality and usefulness of the service – performance and efficiency has been reviewed. EDCC organisation and a review of the nature of enquiries, are out of scope.

Public and private contact centres. The tender specifications placed considerable attention on benchmarking with public and private contact centres. Benchmarking is understood both as "hard" benchmarking, comparing contact centre metrics and targets, and other performance metrics (e.g. attrition, staff satisfaction, time spend on enquiries, contact unit costs) and "softer" benchmarking. Softer benchmarking, in this context include:

- For the **public sector**: exploring organisation set up foundation, and strategic development, staffing, outsourcing, coverage (including EU questions), integration with other information sources and communication outreach, factors which drive costs and priorities and key objectives going forward
- For the **private sector**: changes in priorities for available services, and services most in demand, relative costs of such services, and integration and use of AI for knowledge management and addressing enquiries

1.4 About the Europe Direct Contact Centre

The Europe Direct Contact Centre, (EDCC) is the Commission's contact centre offering a centralised one stop shop for information about the EU to citizens. It is an outsourced service supervised by the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM).

The EDCC is part of a wider EU effort to inform and communicate the EU to citizens of the EU and elsewhere. Its objectives are to:

- Offer a reliable and direct service to answer citizens who have an EU-related question, with the focus on quality rather than quantity
- Contribute to a positive image of the EU via the very existence of the service, and via the quality of the replies
- Reduce costs for the Commission via the centralised service of the EDCC (in particular by reducing administrative work by officials in the competent services)

The service fits within DG COMM's specific objective to provide "Meaningful and tailored messages, focussed on the Commission's headline ambitions, are communicated to citizens, media, multipliers and stakeholders".³

The EDCC responds directly to questions, guides citizens towards sources of information and advice that best meet their needs and escalates complex or sensitive questions to relevant experts within the European Commission (EC) or other entities.⁴ Given the scope of its services, capacity and presence on EU and Commission websites, it is seen as *de facto* the EU's contact centre.⁵

Launched in 1996, Europe Direct started out as an e-mail service addressing questions of a general nature about the EU, as a part of the Citizens First initiative. The Europe Direct Contact Centre was officially established in May 2000. The service initially focused only on citizens, but soon after was extended to address enquiries from businesses. A common telephone line was launched in 2004.

1.4.1 Scope of enquiries

Enquiries relate to all EU matters. The EDCC provides first level information and guidance on information sources covering all EU related topics. Requests for both general and specific information are handled by the EDCC. Furthermore, the service provides access to advice to assist users in overcoming practical problems in relation to exercising their rights in Europe (Your Europe Advice, SOLVIT).

Where specialised information is requested by a user or where users need assistance in overcoming practical problems the Contact Centre transfers enquiries to DG COMM or to associated specialised services. In this respect the EDCC operates as a first stop shop.

In addition to its main role as a provider of a question/answer and a first stop shop for information the EDCC also provides a feedback service to the Commission Services.

The EDCC service is accessible via webforms (email service), phone and, since November 2022, instant messaging (Messenger app linked to the Commission's corporate Facebook account). The EDCC used to provide web chat services, but these have been discontinued. The unique and free phone number: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 is available from anywhere in the EU on weekdays from 09:00 – 18:00 CET.

The email service aims at answering any enquiry within three working days. The enquiry is sent through a contact form on the website of the European Union. The EDCC answers directly to the email address of the enquirer, generally in the language of the enquiry. The EDCC provides

³ DG Communication, Management plan 2023

⁴ The EDCC does not comment on EU policy issues or position neither does it handle or forward complaints. As an information provider it does, however, indicate who to contact for complaints

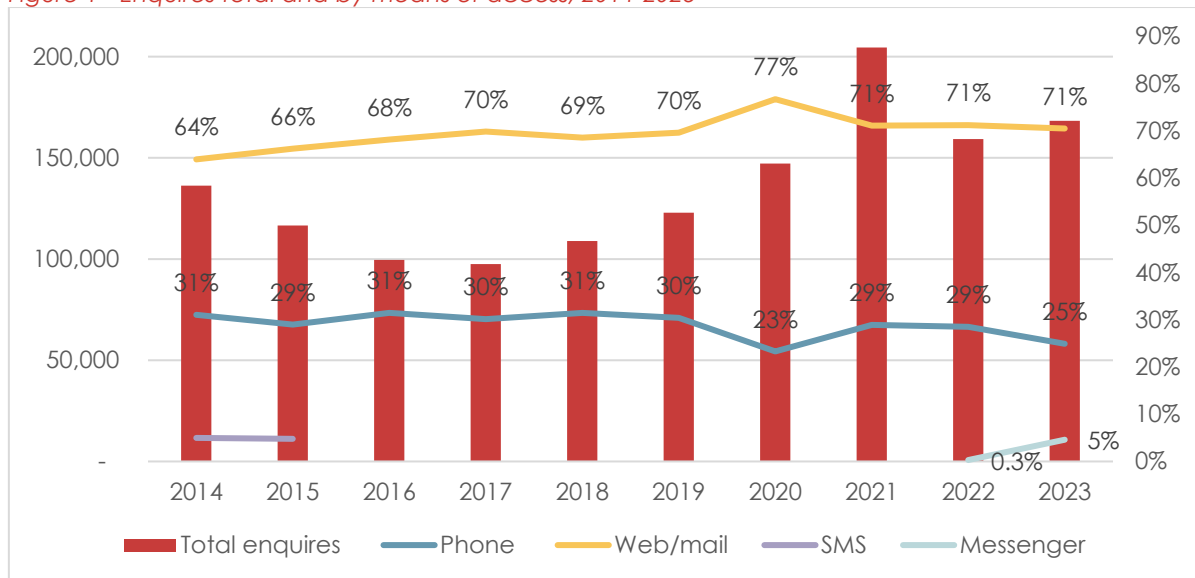
⁵ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, European direct contact centre – Annual activity report 2022, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/321089>

information in all 24 official EU languages, from English (with 73,569 queries in 2023) to Irish (as low as 62 enquiries in 2023).

1.4.2 Number of enquiries

The number of enquiries fluctuates year on year. There has been a significant increase in the number of enquiries in the last years, reaching close to (or above) 160,000 enquiries annually in the last three years. An all-time high of +200,000 enquiries was registered in 2021. In total, the EDCC catered for 532,000 contacts in the 2021-2023 period. Roughly, 7 in 10 of the enquiries are submitted by mail. Phone enquiries represented 25% of all enquiries in 2023 (down from previous years). Messenger represented 4.6% of the enquiries in 2023.

Figure 1 - Enquires total and by means of access, 2014-2023



Source: EDCC annual reports, 2014-2023

1.4.3 KPIs and Performance

To manage the contract and ensure consistent quality and delivery, the contract specifications define a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to which the contractor must adhere. These KPIs relate notably to speed of replies/response time; first contact resolution rate;⁶ maximum escalation rates; quality of the replies; forecasting and user satisfaction. Additionally, the contract sets out key requirements, and other indicators for reporting.

Each KPI carries a pre-defined bonus/malus weight, and an aggregate monthly bonus malus score is calculated across the set of KPIs. If, for any given KPI, the contractor underperforms below the minimum acceptable value for three consecutive months or more, DG Communication may apply a penalty of up to 3% per missed KPI on the original invoice, in addition to the bonus/malus scheme. For any KPI which underperforms below the minimum value for six consecutive months, a penalty of 5% may be applied on top. Financial awards or penalties are applied to monthly invoices, depending on performance against KPIs. Payment

⁶First-contact resolution rate is the percent of contacts that are resolved by the service desk on the first interaction with the customer.

by enquiry, and the implementation of the KPI based bonus malus system is a new feature of the EDCC operation. A different payment model was used under previous contracts.

KPIs and other indicators are reported on a monthly basis. Table 1 below provides an overview of the Contact Centre's KPIs for the period 2021 to 2023. A review of performance against KPIs can be found in **Error! Reference source not found..** This Appendix also presents other performance indicators which have been used for the study.

Table 1 – EDCC KPIs (2021-2023)

KPIs	Description	Target	Bonus/malus weight
<i>Telephone only</i>			
Calls answered within 30 seconds	80% of incoming calls must be answered by an agent within 30 seconds, measured from the time the call is routed to an agent. A cascade system is implemented in order to avoid unanswered calls after 30 seconds by routing it to another agent.	80% , Minimum acceptable: 72%	5%
Abandoned calls	The rate of abandoned calls must not exceed 5% of all incoming calls. A call is considered abandoned if the citizen, after having waited 30 seconds or more, hangs up without either speaking to a communication officer or leaving a voice message. The rate of abandoned calls applies to each language separately	<5% Minimum acceptable: 5.5%	5%
<i>All Enquiries</i>			
First contact resolution rate	The first contact resolution rate must be at least 95%. The first level resolution rate is the share of all received enquiries that are answered without escalation to the second level.	≥95% Minimum acceptable: 85.5%	15%
Average response time, first level	The average response time for first level enquiries must be within a maximum of 2 working days. ¹² This includes also responses follow up by email or call back for phone calls that could not be resolved within the first contact, but still answered at first level.	Max. 2 days Minimum Acceptable: 2.5 days	10%
Second level enquiry forwarding average time	Second level enquiries must be forwarded to the back-office within an average time of 2 working days.	Max. 2 days Minimum Acceptable: 2.5 days	10%
Returned second level enquiry handling	Returned second level enquiries must be proceed and sent to the citizen within a maximum average of 2 working days.	Max. 2 days Minimum Acceptable: 2.5 days	10%
<i>Quality of services</i>			
Quality of the replies	Results of the evaluation of a sample of answers undertaken by DG COMM. This results in an average quality score on a scale from 0 to 100. The quality of the replies must obtain a score of at least 80.	>80 Minimum acceptable: 72	15%
User satisfaction	The minimum rate of satisfied users must be 80% over for any given month. It is determined through users' satisfaction surveys which are used to assess quality. Additional hereto the contractor is also requested to report on participation rates in the citizens' satisfaction survey, per channel (and ensure data access).	>80% Minimum acceptable: 72%	15%
<i>Forecasts</i>			
Forecast accuracy	The number of enquiries is to be forecasted by the contractor. The forecast accuracy is calculated monthly, as the difference between the latest agreed forecast and the actual number of	>85% Minimum acceptable: 76.5%	5%

KPIs	Description	Target	Bonus/ malus weight
	enquiries, expressed as a percentage of the actual number. The forecast accuracy must be at least 85%		
<i>Staff requirements</i>			
Job satisfaction rate	The contractor must measure the job satisfaction of the staff and report on their absence and turn-over rate. A metric for measuring job satisfaction is to be designed by the contractor. It is to consider, self-reported job satisfaction, absence, and turnover rate. It is understood, that in addition to the composite indicator covering job-satisfaction, the contractor is to report on measured job satisfaction, absence, and turnover rate.	>80% Minimum acceptable: 72%	5%
Knowledge base	This indicator measures to what degree the data in the knowledge base is of good quality and is actually used by the communication officers. It is intended to reflect the quality of the work of the contractor in organising the knowledge base and curate the content. The score for the quality of the knowledge base must be at least 80, which is to correspond to the "level of pertinence" that allows rapid, efficient and centralised data processing and usage, as well as business continuity independent from staff expertise and knowledge". The detail of how this indicator is measured is not known (as it is designed by the contractor).	>80% Minimum acceptable: 72%	10%

Source: Tender specifications, call for tenders' Operation of THE EUROPE DIRECT Contact Centre (EDCC)COMM/2020/OP/0015,

1.4.4 The knowledge base and improvements

To address the enquiries, the EDCC is supported by a knowledge base, which is built, implemented, and operated as part of the contract. The knowledge base is to be transferred to the Commission, at the end of the contract.

The costs of initial developments (building, adapting and operating) are covered by the flat rate of the phase-in period. However, additional resources have been allocated to the further development of the knowledge base integrating Artificial Intelligence features (AI), under a separate contract.

The purpose is to optimise the work and to increase the efficiency of the Communication Officers within the EDCC as well as to interconnect with other services of the European Commission.

Six main strands are being implemented as add-ons to the main EDCC contract:

- Machine learning models to train AI for changing topics handled by the EDCC
- e-Translation for outgoing emails and articles in the knowledge base
- AI based automated ranking and suggested articles (re-rank resources based on COs interaction/prompts)
- AI based automatically generating answers to Webform (suggestions)
- Integration of Vocbench service (classification)
- Enhanced access: Integration of EU log in for knowledge base access

Additionally, reserves are allocated to the opening up of the knowledge base for other institutions and for the potential participation in a Joint Research Centre's project on sentiment analysis.

A total budget of some EUR 0.5 million is allocated to improvements in knowledge management, and related activities. It is estimated that the implementation of AI features in the knowledge base will generate efficiency gains in the range of 13% for normal enquiries – or a decrease in the average time spent from 16.1 minute to 13.9 minutes. Average time spent on obsolete emails is expected to decrease significantly. Eighty per cent of obsolete enquiries are expected to be treated automatically without human intervention. The remaining 20% will be treated manually, but with an estimated efficiency gain of 37% (from 2.7 minutes to 1.7 minutes per enquiry).

2 Methodological approach to the study and the work carried out

2.1 Questions and themes to be addressed

the Tender Specifications identified five main strands to be covered and a set of six questions to be addressed. The strands were:

- Trends in public sector enquiry services
- Trends in the contact centre profession
- Quality and usefulness of EDCC replies
- Pricing structure
- Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions

The strands, and the associated questions are specified in Table 2 overleaf. Table 2 also provides an overview of additional topics which were covered as part of the study, to provide a more comprehensive base to draw conclusions and recommendation for DG COMM going forward.

Table 2 - Overview of the coverage of the study

Strand	Coverage specifications (Tender specifications)	Questions to be covered (tender specifications)	Scope included
Trends in public sector enquiry services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governmental enquiry services in general. purpose: Benchmarking governmental service with the EDCC Enquiry services on EU matters (as relevant) 	How can the operation of the EDCC be improved based on evidence from governmental contact centres in the EU Member States?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key attributes of public sector enquiry services (Scope of services) Operation KPIs set for the service, Importance of key metrics and performance What contact centre success looks like to public contact centres Total costs of service and unit costs, handling time Use of key technologies Current and future use and understanding of AI feedback on the current discussions on the future of such services and their development strategy The level to which these types of operations are looking to pursue a digital-first future EDCC comparison
Trends in the contact centre profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current strategic developments in the contact centre profession, i.e. the business sector, which also and mainly serves private sector customer service activities. Trends in communication channels Knowledge management and use of AI 	<p>Which channels and context would citizen like to use to get factual information from the EU in the future?</p> <p>How should the EDCC use Artificial Intelligence in knowledge management in the future, based on evidence from the contact centre profession in general?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key contact centre metrics Agent engagement and empowerment and impact on customer outcomes Omnichannel Workforce Optimisation in the context of remote and hybrid working environments Enquiry costs How is IA used, for what, and greatest potential Solutions implemented by operations similar to EDCC Costs and issues arising in HR & operational performance specific multilingual operations EDCC comparison
Quality and usefulness of EDCC replies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New insights on whether the replies given by the EDCC are actually useful for the citizens who receive them. Whether citizens actually do use the reply for a purpose. 	Is the quality of the replies currently given by the EDCC satisfactory seen from the citizens perspective and how could they be improved?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disaggregated analysis of existing user satisfaction to explore satisfaction across individual metrics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfaction across channels, topical and type of questions Complementary data collection – to gather new insight into <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehensiveness Use of information, action which was taken as a result of the enquiry

Strand	Coverage specifications (Tender)	Questions to be covered (tender specifications)	Scope included
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contact touch points and preferred channels going forward.
Pricing structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pricing structure of the EDCC and bonus-malus system • Extent to which mechanisms have been economically advantageous for the Commission, and how they could be further improved 	What realistic pricing structure for the future Framework Contract for the EDCC would lead to maximum cost-benefit efficiency, based on evidence from the contact centre profession?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audit of contractual relations under current contract, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - appropriateness of the charging mechanism against the objectives of the service - Performance against industry standards and best practice - Areas of the contract where change could provide cost savings • Chargeable rate analysis and invoicing health check – to identify over- or underbilling
Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions	Analysis of cooperation between "Ask EP" by the European Parliament and The Council Public Information Service.	How can the cooperation between the EDCC and the corresponding services in other main EU institutions be improved?	Review of Ask EP and Council enquiry services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale and nature of the EP and Council services. enquiry complexity/service uniqueness compared to the EDCC • Organisation, resource inputs KPIs, user satisfaction, actual performance – and eventual challenges in meeting user demand • Strategy and objectives of the service going forward EDCC collaboration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration agreements, scale of collaboration and "transfer triggers" • Effectiveness and efficiency of collaboration, barriers and triggers for collaboration

2.2 Study design

The report relies upon data collected primarily through desk research, user surveys, interviews and benchmarking. In alignment with the tender specifications a tailored approach was developed for each of the five Themes covered by this report. A summary of these approaches is presented below.

2.2.1 Trends in public sector enquiry services

In order to review and benchmark EDCC service with national public enquiry services, the study team designed a research programme among public information services within 10 Member States. The following steps have been undertaken:

- Sampling
- Desk research
- Interviews

Sampling. 10 contact centres were sampled for in depth review and data collection. The sample aimed to cover a diverse range of Member States, and centres. A wider group of potential centres was mapped as part of the inception stage, from which a purposeful sample was drawn. The criteria used for the selection of the sample were as follows:

- Focus on generalised and national services
- Mix of outsourced and in-house services
- Coverage of both digital guidance services and substantive “information services”
- Geographical diversity ensuring, when possible, coverage of northern, southern, eastern and western European countries
- Inclusion of coverage of European questions (through main services or through complementary services)
- The multi-channel nature of the services

The retained sample consisted of the following centres:

- Austria: Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria⁷
- Denmark: The Danish Public Contact Centre (supporting all all-major national IT self service solutions⁸)
- Estonia: Contact Centre of the Riigiportaal⁹
- France: Contact Centre of Service Public¹⁰ (dedicated services in 4 areas)
- Germany: Single government service number 115 for businesses and citizens¹¹
- Ireland: Citizens information phone service (CIPS)
- Netherlands: Informatie Rijksoverheid¹²
- Poland: contact centre supporting the Citizen information website

⁷ <https://www.bundeskanzleramt.gv.at/en.html>

⁸ including MitID, MitID Erhverv, NemKonto, Digital Post, Cyberhotline, Digital Fuldmagt, Borger.dk, Kørekort.dk og Sundhedskort.dk

⁹ <https://www.eesti.ee/en/vajad-abi>

¹⁰ <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F33683>

¹¹ <https://www.115.de/#Aktuelles>

¹² <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/contact/informatie-rijksoverheid>

- Portugal: Citizen Helpline¹³
- Spain: Spanish General Access Point, General number 060

Desk research. The second step undertaken to address theme 1, involved the collation of descriptive, and performance data covering the sampled contact centre services. Publicly available data was collected. In most cases this information related to baseline data regarding accessibility and opening hours. More comprehensive information, however, was available for selected centres (France, Ireland).

Additionally, for non-publicly available data, the team requested performance data from the contact centres themselves.

Interviews. Whenever possible, interviews have been conducted with the representative bodies responsible for the centres. In total we have consulted 15 informants responsible for seven contact centres.

The list of interviewees is included in **Error! Reference source not found..** Despite several attempts, it was not possible to consult the responsible authorities in Spain and Poland. For these Member States we rely on publicly available information.

2.2.2 Trends in the contact centre profession

To research key developments in the contact centre profession, and to allow for benchmarking with the EDCC services, two separate stems have been undertaken.

2.2.2.1 Desk analysis

In order to provide a comprehensive review of key trends in the contact centre industry we have relied on ContactBabel surveys undertaken among the contact centre industry.

Bespoke analysis has been undertaken based on ContactBabel data, covering all of the indicators which have been agreed as part of the inception stage. Datasets, charts and analysis has been segmented by “Small Inbound Service (SIS)” operations and “overall industry”.

The data cover 358 UK contact centres (“overall industry”) which have been surveyed in 2023 and 2024, with appropriate weighting based on the age of the data. A subset of this dataset covers “SIS” contact centres. These centres have the following characteristics as agreed within the inception report of this project:

- Size: 15-60 seats / agent positions
- Activity: Majority inbound (>90%), at least 90% service-orientated (rather than sales)
- Vertical markets / business sectors: those more concerned with helpdesks rather than account-based service or sales. e.g. public sector, manufacturing, IT helpdesks.

91 contact centres were identified as fitting these criteria. These are studied to provide a view of what the contact centre industry, as a whole, looks like and to compare how and why this is different to SIS operations.

The full analysis of contact centres data is included in **Error! Reference source not found.. Error! Reference source not found.** contains a review of EU citizens usage of social media and

¹³ <https://eportugal.gov.pt/en/linhas-uteis>

messenger apps (outside the scope of contact centres: what brands of instant messaging the population of the EU uses in general), as requested as part of the inception stage.

Additionally, the contractor has provided selected data as regards agent morale, rewards and motivation, given the interest in these topics as expressed during the meeting on the 3rd of July 2024.

2.2.2.2 Consultations with key industry stakeholders in Europe

To complement the desk analysis, a qualitative interview programme, with industry stakeholders was undertaken. The purpose of these interviews was to understand and gauge the qualitative and anecdotal concerns and issues facing these contact centres that cannot be quantified.

In total we consulted with 26 informants, covering a mix of representative organisations of the contact centre industry, individual contact centres and outsourcers, from across Europe. The list of interviewees is included in Appendix D.

2.2.3 Quality and usefulness of EDCC replies

To address questions of EDCC user satisfaction, a two-step approach was implemented, involving analysis of the existing user satisfaction data and an expansion of the user satisfaction survey.

2.2.3.1.1 Disaggregated analysis of user satisfaction data

This analysis covered disaggregated user satisfaction data covering the most recent closed year (2023), as well as data for the first five months of 2024.

The user satisfaction data covered four questions. Background data on the topics covered in the enquiries has been provided and used to analyse the survey data.

Analysis has been undertaken by service channel, accepting that there is a strong bias in the response rates (phone users replied in higher numbers to the EDCC user survey than email users and the webchat also generates much higher response rates).

In total, the analysis has covered 13,053 survey replies, representing an average response rate of 5.4%. However, for email the response rate is 1.4%.

Table 3 - Representativeness of survey results

	Total questions Jan-23 to May 2024*	Completed survey replies to Jan-23 to May 2024	Response rate standard survey
Email	169,820	2,388	1.4%
Call	60,692	9,167	15.1%
Chat	11,988	1,498	12.5%
Sum	242,500	13,053	5.4%

Source: EDCC reporting data. *Estimate for 2024, counting incoming enquiries

2.2.3.2 Expanded user satisfaction survey

In order to gather more details on the quality and usefulness of the replies, an expanded user survey was designed as part of the study. It was translated into 8 languages (the most used languages of the EDCC), for upload by the EDCC contractor.

The expanded user survey covered 8 close-ended questions (including the four standard questions) and one open-ended question (the latter was only for the surveys targeting email

and messenger enquiries). Background data on the topics covered in the enquiries, and the type of questions was provided and used to analyse the survey data.

The expanded user survey operated between the 7th of July 2024 and the 31st of August 2024 and generated 1,423 replied. The response rate overall is marginally lower than for the standard survey. However, the response rate for email is higher than the standard survey.

The questionnaire structure for the expanded user survey is included in Appendix E.

Table 4 - Representativeness of survey results, expanded user survey

	Questions Jan-23 to May 2024*	Completed** replies: expanded survey (July-Aug 24)	Response rate expanded survey
Email	19,541	464	2.4%
Call	6,037	864	14.3%
Chat	1,722	95	5.5%
Sum	27,300	1,423	5.2%

Source: EDCC reporting data**Counts only replies in the languages in which the survey was conducted, total replies in the period were 30888. Total replies in the languages of the survey were 27300. This represents 88% of all questions in the period. ** All respondents to chat and mail question completed the survey. There was drop out in the phone survey. For comparability we competition in the phone survey means at least four questions were answered. 864 replied to 4 questions, The final question of the phone survey only received 615 responses with a 10.2 % completion rates.

2.2.4 Pricing structure

The commercial audits that underpin Strand 4 is based on a review of the contract and supplier invoicing which are the major driving force for costs. The following activities were undertaken: desk review, consultation with DG COMM and review against best practice. The following documentation was reviewed:

- Vendor Management.
 - Minutes from supplier meetings and contracts
 - Ways of working and governance model
 - Examples of monthly performance reporting
 - Examples of emails between EDCC & ESN
- Commercial.
 - Governance process for commercial aspects of the engagement with suppliers
 - Contracts and change notes with the suppliers in scope
 - Unit rates and a definition of charging structures
 - Forecast process and delegated authority matrix
- Finance.
 - End-to-end process from PO raised to invoice payment from a finance and systems perspective
 - Invoice and data requirements from suppliers for finance system
 - Data used to validate the invoices
- Resource Planning.

- Volumes - both historical and forecasts
- Raw data from supplier on performance around AHT, Quality, etc.
- Existing planning process and governance to calculate FTE requirements
- Data requirements for invoice justification

2.2.5 Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions

To provide an analysis of cooperation between "Ask EP" by the European Parliament and The Council Public Information Service, two main lines of research were undertaken: desk research and interviews.

Desk research covered reporting data on the "Ask EP" service and the Council's Public Information Service (scope of services, nature of questions, accessibility and promotion). Additionally, escalation guidelines for the EDCC (to these services), reports from the EDCC to these services, and information on the number of enquiries which have been transferred from these services to the EDCC were reviewed.

Additionally, the study team undertook three group interviews to inform this strand, involving the EU officials responsible for the Council's Public Information Service and the European Parliament Ask EP service as well as with DG COMM. Officials interviewed are listed in **Error! Reference source not found.**

2.3 Key challenges encountered

The study, overall, has been implemented in line with the proposed approach, taking into account additional suggestions and proposals for change made by the Steering Committee. The following challenges, however, should be noted:

- Variable response rate from public contact centres and variation in data quality. Despite multiple requests for interviews and data for all of the 10 sampled contact centres, not all centres were equivalently responsive. The responsible for two centres did not reply (Poland and Spain). In the case of Ireland, the responsible body provided information, although a full-scale interview was declined. A further challenge is the variation in data quality. Some centre shared high quality data. In other cases, mapping is primarily reliant on qualitative data provided (or data available in the public domain)
- High levels of cancellations of planned interviews with the contact centre industry. This feature is likely to reflect the fact that interviews were undertaken in the holiday period (planned between mid-July and end August)
- Lack of responsiveness of the European External Action Service (EEAS).
- Due to the timeline of the study the survey was undertaken from 7th July to 31st August 2024. It is possible that the sort of questions submitted to the EDCC, and the user groups may vary from other months.

3 Findings of Strand 1: Trends in public sector enquiry services

This section of the report address strand 1 of the study: trends in public sector enquiry services. This section outlines key aspects of the operations and performance of a range of public contact centres, with the aim of benchmarking the EDCC against these services.

This section also provides an overview of the current state of play in public contact centres, including overall trends in performance, staffing, use of different channels, and the adoption of new technologies, including the use of AI. Amongst others, the following question is addressed:

- How can the operation of the EDCC be improved based on evidence from governmental contact centres in the EU Member States?

The approach to sampling the public contact centres and the research methods used are outlined above, in Section 2.2.1.

Ranges of figures have been provided for the majority of indicators, with specific data provided for certain centres as relevant, due to variance in the data and in light of differences between different types of public contact centres. The main findings of the section are as follows:

Organisational foundation

The public contact centres within the sample are either located within specific ministries that relate to public policy and/or citizens' rights, operating as part of their communications remit, (Austria, France, Ireland) or they are part of ministries and departments overseeing the digitalisation and simplification of public services (Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain).

This positioning within the government is strongly linked to the scope of services provided by the contact centres, with those linked to ministries providing information specific to related policy areas, and the majority of those operated by digitalisation ministries/departments focused more on technical support for digital services, in line with a digital-first support model.

The digital-first model and knowledge management

There appears to be a trend towards a digital-first model amongst many of the public contact centres. This approach allows citizens to access information and services online 24/7, thereby reducing the number of simple queries submitted to contact centres. Typically, this approach relies on relevant public bodies and government departments updating information that falls within their remit, but updates can be prompted by the contact centres.

While the scope of the EDCC's service means that it cannot operate a self-service portal, there are lessons that can be learned from how the public sector prioritises the provision and maintenance of up-to-date online information for citizens. In particular, there are opportunities for the EDCC to use insights in its reporting data, to improve online information and communicate key findings to relevant departments within the Commission.

Public contact centres generally lag behind their private centre counterparts in their use of AI and machine learning. However, the public centres are also considering or starting to use AI. Main usage currently evolves around call analytics in order to help identify major trends or issues

that can then be addressed. Overall, as for private contact centres, the development of AI to support and improve service delivery is seen as a priority across all centres.

EDCC performance benchmarked against public contact centres

Overall, EDCC metrics are superior to, or of a similar level, to public contact centres in operational performance and key HR agent metrics.

EDCC talk time / post-call activity is very different from other public contact centre operations, and cost per interaction is significantly higher. Aspects which likely drive up costs are the superior operational metrics, the nature of the work (i.e. complexity of questions and answers) and multilingual services provided by the EDCC.

The EDCC, as can be seen below in Table 5, performs well against several metrics relating to responsiveness and efficiency when compared to the public contact centres. The main points of difference are:

- The use of channels, with the EDCC responding to a much higher proportion of emails
- The proportion of time spent on reporting / post-call activity, which take up a much larger amount of EDCC agents' time, compared to their public sector counterparts
- Enquiries per agent per year, bearing in mind EDCC's focus on email and more complex enquiries
- Cost per interaction, although this may not be directly comparable across services

Table 5 - Benchmarking of EDCC against Public Contact Centres

Metric	EDCC	Public centres	Assessment
Average speed to answer phone calls (mm:ss)	00:18 (82.1% within 30 seconds)	00:20-05:08	The EDCC performs well, responding more quickly to phone call than all of the public CCs
Call abandonment rate	5.5%	3%-38%	Lower than most public contact centres, but some centres with higher abandonment rates use IVR to resolve enquiries. NB – EDCC figures include all abandoned calls, although in the reporting, only those abandoned after > 30 seconds are included (4.4%)
First-contact resolution rate	94.5%	66%-96.5%	Not directly comparable
Call duration (talk time only)	6:00	00:29-7:44	EDCC's performance is similar to most public CCs
Talk time / post-call activity	35% / 65%	90 / 10%	EDCC spends far more time on post-call work than public CCs
Channel use: Telephone Email Social media / messaging	25% 70% 5%	50-100% 0-50% 0-12%	Emails are far more important to EDCC than to other operations. Use of chat/social media is consistent with public CCs
Agent attrition rate (annual)	14.1%	No quant. data available	EDCC attrition appears to be lower than many public CCs, which reported issues with staff attribution

Agent absence rate	3.4%	8.1% ¹⁴	EDCC absence appears to be lower than for public CCs, although data is limited
Enquiries per agent per year	4,105	6,300-9,000	EDCC's agents handle a lower volume of queries in a year, compared to public CC agents
Cost per interaction		€6.85-€10.87	EDCC cost per interaction is far higher than public CCs. However, care should be taken as there is no agreed calculation method
Email handling time	2.9 days	3-5 days	Data for public CCs is limited, but EDCC appears to of similar standard

Diversity of channels and use of social media

The majority of public contact centres focus on phone and email enquiries. However, several services expressed a preference for phone, observing that email presents greater challenges in terms of the quality of responses and customer satisfaction, as well as a slightly higher cost. The EDCC deals with more email than phone enquiries, as a proportion of total enquiries, which is the inverse of the public contact centres, where phone is the dominant channel. However, this may partly be a reflection of the complexity of queries handled by the EDCC.

A couple of public services offer chat facilities, although this channel is not used widely and, in the case of at least one contact centre, is provided primarily for users who struggle using the phone. In general, public contact centres were sceptical about chatbots, due to concerns about user experience, as well the accuracy and quality of replies, and only one contact centre had plans to rollout chatbot functionality for basic enquiries.

There was a strong consensus amongst the majority of public contact centres around avoiding the use of social media channels. Primarily, concerns related to privacy and data protection. However, there were also issues related to the ability to respond to complex enquiries and potential risks around the escalation of costs.

3.1 Organisation foundations

3.1.1 Focus and scope of public sector enquiry services

While all centres covered by this study, provide information to citizens, each of the public contact centres has a specific remit. The focus and scope of activities of each centre has consequences for its mode of operations and delivery of services, as well as impacting how its performance is evaluated.

The **Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria (CSFCA)** provides general information on public administrative affairs. The main topics covered by the service are requests and enquiries to the Chancellor, the Chancellery Ministers and the State Secretary, or enquiries regarding domestic political issues and international issues.

Alongside this general service, there are specific citizen services for each of the twelve Ministries, which provide topical coverage of their specific domains and each of the nine

¹⁴ % only available for Denmark, CIPs in Ireland reported 2,597.5 hours were lost due to sickness absence in 2023.

Federal States has their own citizen service. Due to this broad range of alternative sources of information and advice, the CSFCA receives a relatively low number of annual enquiries.

There is a strong emphasis on providing detailed, reliable information to citizens in relation to their specific issues and questions. Consequently, the staff need a firm understanding of the Austrian administrative processes and a broad knowledge of current political issues, on both a domestic and international/European level.

Public Contact Centre in Denmark assists users with information, and especially using the various self-service solutions available to Danish residents. This includes borger.dk, the official self-service portal for citizens in Denmark which cover tailored information on a wide range of topics, including healthcare, education, social services, taxation, and employment. However, the contact centre also covers all other major national IT solutions.¹⁵ In total the contact centre, supports nine public digital solutions, four of which are aimed at businesses (approx. 30% of users) and the rest citizens (approx. 70% of users).

The contact centre exclusively assists with enquiries related to the scope of these services, providing support in navigating the webpages, citizens information and using the self-service portal. Citizens with enquiries that do not concern the IT solutions, and the information it provides, are referred to the physical citizen service, where they can receive guidance. In-person support is also provided to individuals who cannot engage with the digital platform, for example citizens who are disabled, elderly or who lack internet access.

The **Government of Estonia's Riigiportaal** contact centre also has a strong focus on providing IT support to users of the Riigiportaal e-portal (eesti.ee), which provides public services and information to citizens, businesses and officials in Estonia. The most important support that the centre provides is for the e-elections, which are online. The online service is supported by the **RIA service** contact centre, which addresses technical queries related to the web portal.

The **Allo Service Public**, France, supports the citizen portal, Service Public (service-public.fr), covering enquiries in selected core areas: Labour law in the private sector; housing and urban planning; civil or criminal judicial procedures; family, personal, or inheritance law; law concerning foreigners, associations, or civil status. Other areas of Service Public are covered by a separate service.

The Allo Service Public contact centre provides citizens with knowledge on their rights, as well as information on administrative procedures. The contact centre is staffed by specialised informants who are detached agents of the ministries with knowledge in various fields such as social security, taxation, employment, and more. While they provide guidance on procedures and clarifications on legal topics, they do not handle individual cases or legal advice.

Germany's 115 service is the overall product under which 54 call centres around Germany are organised and is the largest public contact centre service in the sample. The service has a broad remit, providing information on all matters of public administration for citizens and businesses, including municipalities, states and the federal government. Many enquiries are relatively simple and can be addressed quickly.

The 115 product is managed by the Federal IT-Collaboration (FITKO) which is a public agency under the sponsorship of the German federal states, employing nine FTEs in its product

¹⁵ Including electronic ID (MitID, MitID Erhverv) digital post, a cyber hotline, and the IT platforms supporting the issuing of driving licences, and national health cards (Kørekort.dk, Sundhedskort.dk)

management team. The individual centres vary in size from 2 to 200 agents, with an estimated 800 FTE staff employed in total, and each centre manages its own staffing.

Ireland's Citizen Information Phone Service (CIPS) is a contact centre that provides information of citizens' rights and entitlements, including social welfare, employment rights, health services, housing, education, consumer affairs, taxation and justice. The CIPS is overseen and funded by the Citizens Information Board, a non-commercial statutory body that provides independent information, advice, and advocacy on public and social services, via a range of services including the Citizens Information Board website and over 260 Citizens Information Centres across Ireland. This model means that citizens can access a wide range of information online for simple queries but can also be referred to in-person services for more complex cases, particularly those requiring legal advice or advocacy services.

Informatie Rijksoverheid in the Netherlands responds to citizens' enquiries related to laws, rules and public services, redirecting them to the relevant agencies as necessary. Topics covered include housing, education, government and democracy, justice, transport, health, migration, taxation, and employment. Business-related enquiries are handled by another contact centre.

The **gov.pl service of Poland** is a digital-first service that provides information for citizens, entrepreneurs, officials and farmers. It also hosts a website with information for citizens of Ukraine. There is a general "hotline" phone service provided for users who cannot use the online services or are unable to find the information they require online, as well as specialised phone services addressing specific topics such as education.

The **Administrative Modernization Agency (AMA) of Portugal** contact centre provides support to Portuguese citizens, businesses, and foreign nationals regarding public services, including assisting with applications, providing information, and facilitating access to digital public services. The centre assists with a range of practical tasks, such as renewing passports and ID cards; requesting official certificates/documentation; school enrolment; submitting income tax returns. The service addresses a large number of annual requests.

The **Punto de Acceso General in Spain** is an e-portal that is supported by the **060 service**, which offers citizens general administrative information about the public services and procedures of the General State Administration via phone, email and webchat. Topics covered include employment, welfare, taxes and administrative procedures, and citizens can be referred to the telephone services of specific Ministries or government departments. The service does not provide legal advice or guidance. Citizens can also access in-person information and support via a network of information and citizen service offices, operated by the Ministries and their dependent bodies, Autonomous Communities and City Councils.

3.1.2 Location of services within governments

The Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria is located within the Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria, which is the ministry led by the Chancellor of Austria. The Chancellery's main function is to support the policies and public relations of the Federal Government. The six departments within the Chancellery are Presidium; Integration, Culture and Minorities; Women's Affairs and Gender Mainstreaming; EU, International Affairs and Principal Questions; Constitution; Family and Youth.

For the Danish Public Contact Centre, the Digitalisation Agency oversees the Consolidated Support for end users of the public sector's IT solutions. The support is handled by the Danish Business Authority (Erhvervsstyrelsen) which is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the contact centre.

The RIA service contact centre, which supports Estonia's Riigiportaal, is part of the Republic of Estonia's Information System Authority. The RIA oversees the development and administration of information systems ensuring the interoperability of the state's information system, organises activities related to information security, and handles security incidents in Estonian computer networks.

The Allo Service Public, France, is managed by the Direction de l'information légale et administrative (DILA), which is the central administrative directorate of the Prime Minister's services, under the authority of the Secretary General of the Government. The DILA's primary functions are legal dissemination, administrative information and publishing and public debate.

Germany's 115 service is managed by the Federal IT-Collaboration (FITKO). FITKO's mandate is to support the practical implementation and development of the digitalisation of public administration. For 115, they play a coordinating role, with individual contact centres managing the day-to-day delivery of services.

The Citizen Information Phone Service (CIPS) is overseen by the Citizens Information Board, which is funded by the Department of Social Protection and is the largest agency under the aegis of the Department. The Department's main role is to formulate and administer policies relating to Ireland's social welfare system.

The ministry responsible for Informatie Rijksoverheid in the Netherlands is the Ministry of General Affairs, which is the ministry of the Prime Minister and coordinates government policy and communications.

The gov.pl service of Poland is supported by the Ministry of Digital Affairs, which is located in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. The mission of the Ministry is to improve citizens' lives through digitalisation and to simplify interactions between the state, citizens and entrepreneurs.

The Administrative Modernization Agency (AMA) of Portugal is the public department responsible for administrative modernization and simplification and electronic administration, for the Portuguese Public Administration, under the supervision of the Secretary of State for Digitalization and Administrative Modernization.

Spain's Punto de Acceso General is overseen by Dirección General de Gobernanza Pública (DGGP), which is the governing body for the Ministry for Digital Transformation and the Public Service. The DGGP oversees the regulation and improvement of the General Administration of the State and its public bodies, including electronic administration and data systems.

3.1.3 Use of outsourcing

The approach to insourcing versus outsourcing varies. The public contact centres in Austria, Denmark, Estonia, France and Germany are run directly by the government. A range of explanations were given for running the centres in-house, these included: the need for specialist knowledge, concerns about quality and reliability, and legal constraints (including data privacy and financial reasons). The contact centre in Denmark noted that outsourcing may be considered in the future, but the authority's current view is that it will be difficult to find a contractor who will be able to deliver the scope of the services currently provided.

The public contact centres in the Netherlands and Ireland are fully outsourced, and the centre in Portugal is managed in-house but uses outsourced staff to answer calls. All three countries have had governments that, in recent years, have been willing to outsource public services.

The contractual arrangements between the companies running the contact centres and governments vary. For both Portugal and the Netherlands, rationale for outsourcing is linked to

the creation of efficiencies and, in particular, being able to scale staffing to demand. This said, the government-run French and Danish services reported having a proportion of agents on short-term contracts, to enable flexibility in staffing.

The use of outsourcing in the CIPS in Ireland has its roots in the historical setup of the Citizens Information Centres, which were originally established by volunteers to serve local communities across Ireland and independent of the government. An arms-length operating model was implemented when the centres started to receive funding from the Irish government. While it may not have been part of the original rationale, the use of outsourcing has meant that certain costs, particularly those related to staffing, have been lower because pay is not linked to public sector salaries. However, low pay has created issues with staff morale.

3.1.4 Coverage and strategies

Each of the centres have, as presented in section 3.1.1 above, a different scope of thematic coverage. However, the strategies towards citizen enquiries also vary. As a result, the priorities and strategy toward promotion of the services vary greatly.

The digital-first model is becoming the norm for most public contact centres. This approach involves investment in online information and services, in close coordination with government departments and bodies. This ensures that reliable information can be accessed easily and quickly 24/7, thereby reducing demand on contact centres. While this model is not suitable for citizens who lack digital access and/or skills, or those with more complex issues, it nonetheless improves the efficiency of public services and is convenient for many citizens.

In line with this model, for many authorities (e.g. Denmark, France, Poland, Portugal Spain), the contact centres act as a support function to a digital first stop shop, intended to provide citizens with information necessary for their interaction with public authorities.

Decreasing enquiries through self-service is, thus, a priority for the majority of services. For example, the French authorities underline that the call service is deliberately not promoted on the portal (or elsewhere), and IVR is used to ensure that only questions within the remit of the service is being covered. Similarly, the Danish contact centre aims to bring down the number of enquiries, using IVR on hot topics and continuously improving information online (including by learning from enquiries to the contact centre).

Compared to the rest of the public contact centres, Germany's 115 service is somewhat unusual in that it offers a very limited digital service and strongly encourages phone enquiries. The website, 115.de, primarily directs users to the phone line, which is branded as "Your direct line to government." This positioning emphasises convenience and high-quality service for citizen. The centre reported that high call volumes increased political support for the service and cooperation from the municipalities, creating incentives to maintain call levels. New technology is primarily being adopted to increase the accessibility of services. There are plans to add FAQs and further contact details to the website, but these are far from a digital-first approach.

3.1.5 EU-related enquiries

The public contact centres focus primarily on enquiries related to national public services and government policies. The enquiries related to the EU that are in scope for certain services generally relate to freedom of movement, immigration and citizenship, mobility programmes, documents such as EHIC cards. Brexit has also been a topic that has been of interest in recent years, particularly for businesses.

Many services indicated that they do not specifically deal with EU-related enquiries and do not have a set process for forwarding out-of-scope requests. However, there were few examples of aspects where EU contact centre support was mentioned, as a potential added value. The example of EU Digital Identity was mentioned.

Some Member States operate separate EU information services (outside of the Europe Direct centre network). Among the countries researched, an example is the Danish Parliament EU information service, which provides information, answers questions, and is engaged in various EU awareness raising activities. Outside of the countries covered, there are some similar examples.¹⁶

3.1.6 Service operation

Phone and email are the most common channels supporting the public contact centres. However, 115 in Germany and the CIPS in Ireland only offer phone services, with additional functionality for users with disabilities. The Danish contact centre also offers browser-assist, which is consistent with its focus on providing technical IT support. AMA Portugal provides online chat, as well as video call for screen-sharing. The Netherlands also offers social media channels.

All but two of the public contact centres operate only on weekdays. The two exceptions are Borger's Contact Centre in Denmark, which provides live services from 10am-4pm on weekends and public holidays, and Punto de Acceso General in Spain, which is open 9am-2pm on Saturdays.

In terms of cost of phone calls, there is a mix between freephone services and services charged at local and national rates. In the case of the latter, many phone companies include the numbers in bundled minutes, so in practice there is often no cost to citizens. There are no additional costs to citizens for enquiries submitted via email and other channels.

Table 6 - Overview of the operation of public sector services

Contact Centre	Channels	Languages	Agents (FTEs)	Service availability	Cost of phone service
Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> German 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10¹⁷ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday – Friday, 8am - 4pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local phone rate
Borger's Contact Centre, Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Contact form/Email Browser-assist SMS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Danish English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 90 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm Saturday-Sunday and Public Holidays, 10am-4pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone
Riigiportaal, Estonia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Estonian English Russian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 8:30am-5:00pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Standard phone rate
Contact Centre of Service Public, France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> French 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 44 	Phone: ¹⁸ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday, Thursday, 8:30am-6:15pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calls - free Callback services – local phone rate

¹⁶ Czechia: Eurofon Part of <https://euroskep.cz/> the governments information site on the EU. Sveriges riksdags EU-information (National parliament EU information service)

¹⁷ 5 phone agents and 5 email agents

¹⁸ When phones are not open, staff respond to email requests and update fiches

Contact Centre	Channels	Languages	Agents (FTEs)	Service availability	Cost of phone service
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tuesday, Wednesday, 8:30am-1pm Friday, 1-5pm 	
115, Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> German 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 800 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 8am-6pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone
Citizen Information Phone Service, Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Webchat (for users with speech/hearing difficulties) (Social media)¹⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English Irish (Gaeilge) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 9am-8pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National phone rate
Informatie Rijksoverheid, The Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email WhatsApp Facebook X 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dutch English Papiamentto 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 8am-8pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local phone rate
Gov.pl, Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Polish English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 8am-4pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone
AMA Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Email Chat Video call (browser sharing) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Portuguese English 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 105 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 9am-6pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local phone rate
Punto de Acceso General, Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone Chat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spanish English Catalan Basque Galician Valencian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monday-Friday, 9am-7pm Saturday, 9am-2pm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone

3.1.7 Size, scale and service demand

The size and scale of the services in the sample of public contact centres varies considerably. The largest, by a significant margin is the 115 service in Germany, which handled over 5.6 million phone calls in 2023. In terms of call volume and staffing, the smallest service is the Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria, which responded to 6,430 phone calls in the same year.

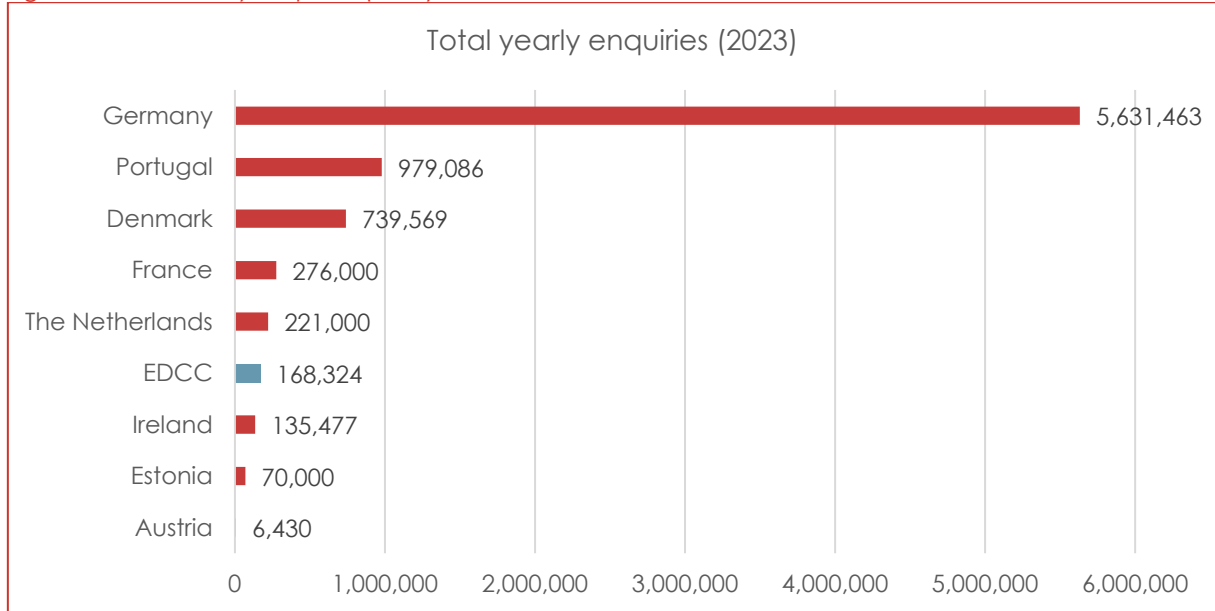
To a large extent variation in the number of enquiries reflects the scope of the services, their coverage, and the strategy. Denmark is an outlier with wide scope in coverage, a large number of enquiries relating to IT solutions (such as eID). IT solution-related enquiries represent close to 90% of the enquiries in 2024. Only 4% of the enquiries are related to the information portal Borger.dk.

Demand for services can fluctuate, depending on the wider context. All services that were open during 2020 and 2021 reported increased levels of enquiries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, several services noted that increases in demand often correspond to changes to government policies or new procedures. However, their ability to meet higher levels

¹⁹ Not officially a channel offered by the service, but they do handle enquiries that are forwarded from official social media channels.

of enquiries is closely linked to flexibility around staffing. Those centres which cannot increase staffing levels easily have to try to create efficiencies elsewhere, but this can make it challenging to maintain response times.

Figure 2 - Total Yearly Enquiries (2023)



Source: Data supplied by the contact centres, analysis by the consortium

3.2 Operational benchmarks

3.2.1 Performance monitoring and KPIs for public contact centres

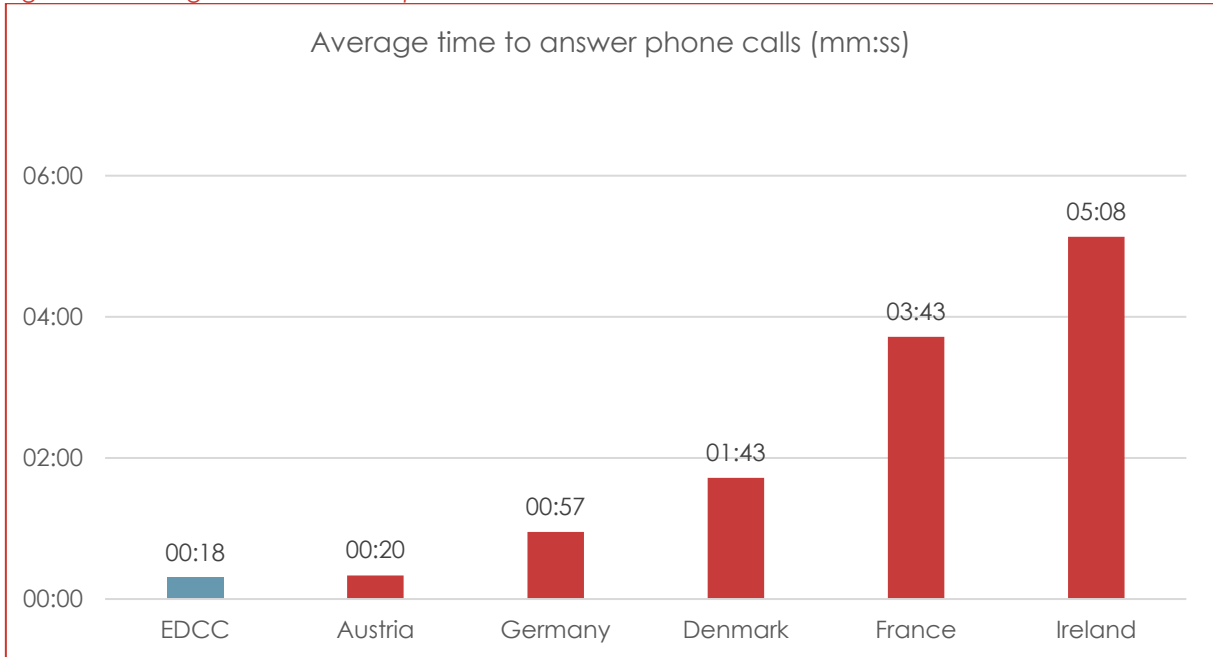
The contact centres in Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland reported having specific KPIs against a range of metrics, in line with how similar services are monitored in the private sector. Others indicated a more light-touch approach to monitoring, which is potentially a reflection of the fact that the centres are operated as public services within larger departments. At the very least, most of the public contact centres collect data on average speed to answer phone calls, phone call answer/abandonment rates and call duration. Moreover, the public contact centres in Estonia and Germany both reported that they have started monitoring more performance criteria in 2024, suggesting a growing focus on performance monitoring.

3.2.2 Speed to answer

The average speed to answer calls varies significantly across centres (Figure 3 **Error! Reference source not found.**), with extremely rapid responses reported in Austria (20s) and the longest pickup time in Ireland (5m08s). In the case of Austria, the centre receives a low volume of calls relative to the number of staff and it is, therefore, unsurprising that responses times would be fast. Conversely the manager of the contact centre in Ireland reported that the call centre was under-staffed relative to the number of enquires.

The Borger's Contact Centre significantly reduced call durations in the first half of 2024, to 1m43s, compared with an average duration of 9m11s across 2023 following a decrease in enquiries. The call wait time for EDCC, at 18s, is lower than all of the public contact centres.

Figure 3 - Average time to answer phone calls²⁰



Source: Data supplied by the contact centres, analysis by the consortium

3.2.3 Call abandonment rate

Call abandonment rates for public contact centres range from 3% to 38% of total calls, but the majority are in the 20% to 38% range. Some call abandonments are expected and, in certain cases, are seen as positive when drop-off can be attributed to call management systems. For example, the Danish contact centre uses Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology to categorise calls and then uses this to push information that may address the user's query via SMS. The centre also uses the IVR system to share timely information on current service issues (e.g. the server is down) or hot topics, which means that users receive answers before connecting to an agent. The French service has also managed to reduce the number of irrelevant calls coming through to agents, by making changes to its IVR system to clarify the types of queries that will receive a response.

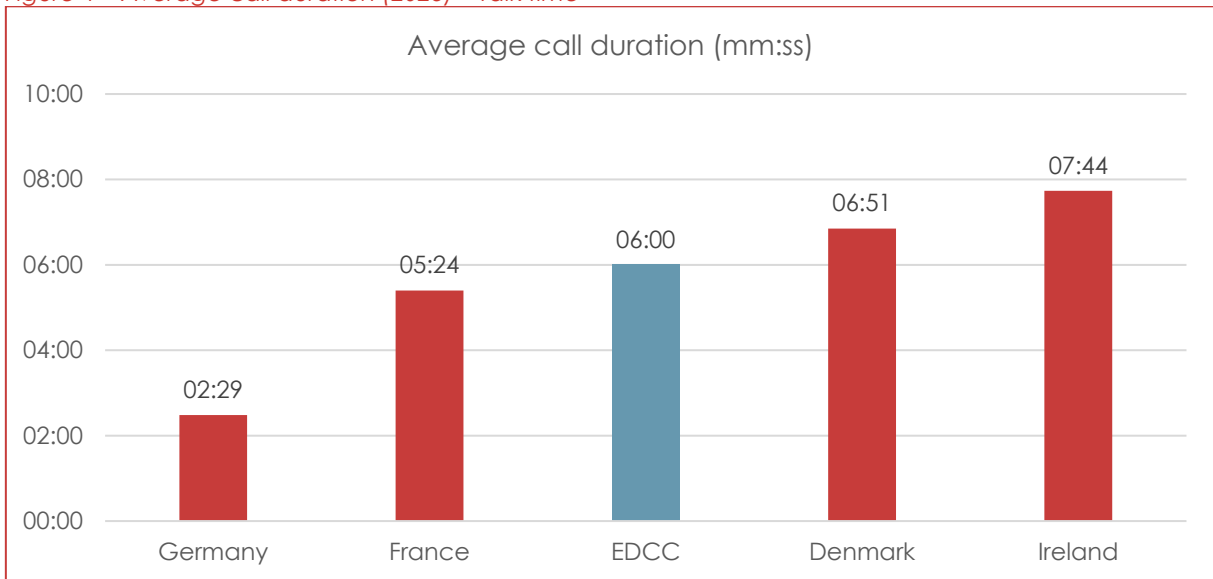
The EDCC reports a call abandonment rate of 5.5%, which is at the lower end of the range for public contact centres, suggesting a high level of responsiveness to phone enquiries.

3.2.4 Call duration

Calls to the Citizens Information Service (CIS) in Ireland are also the longest of those amongst the contact centres that monitor and report on average call duration (Figure 4). The CIS has a broad remit, providing advice and advocacy services, beyond simple information. Moreover, the website which supports CIS offers a broad range of information and, therefore, the answers to simpler enquires can be easily addressed without a phone call. Conversely, the shortest average call duration is for the 115 service in Germany, which receives a high volume of calls, including many simple enquiries. The talk time on calls for the EDCC is comparable to that of the public contact centres, assuming that call duration is calculated in the same way, and in line with wider industry norms.

²⁰ 2023 data for Austria, Germany, France, Ireland and EDCC. 2024 data for Denmark.

Figure 4 – Average call duration (2023) – Talk time



Source: Data supplied by the contact centres, analysis by the consortium

3.2.5 Reporting time

Post-call reporting time per phone enquiry for the public contact centres is 30 seconds or less, based on the available data. Therefore, agents typically spend the equivalent of 5-10% of time spent on the call, at most, on reporting. This suggests that reporting processes are highly streamlined. While the EDCC does not provide a full breakdown of data on reporting time, the fact that 64% of the overall time for phone enquiries for the EDCC is logged to solving and reporting suggests that reporting is considerably more time-consuming and detailed.

3.2.6 Agent activity

The average number of enquiries addressed by each agent at public contact centres ranges from around 6,300 to 9,000 enquiries per agent per year. However, there are a number of factors that affect agents' capacity and not all agents spend their entire working week responding to enquiries.

With 41 FTE staff responding to 168,324 enquiries in 2023, the EDCC's agents handle, on average, 4,105 enquiries per year.

3.2.7 User satisfaction

The majority of services reported that they have systems for monitoring user satisfaction. The Danish contact centre sends post-call SMS messages asking users for a rating on a scale of 1 to 5. Average customer satisfaction, based on 290,048 survey results, is 90.6% for calls and 62.3% for emails (with a KPI of 80%). Allo Service Public in France conducts an annual user satisfaction survey and reports that 87% of phone customers were satisfied with the quality of replies. The same share are satisfied with the form of the reply. The Dutch service collects satisfaction scores for telephone and email enquiries, and its most recent satisfaction scores are 4.51/5 for calls and 3.65/5 for email. The Estonian centre monitors CSAT and Net promoter scores but has not shared data on these metrics.

The Austrian Citizen Service does not currently ask callers for feedback but is considering this in the future. The CIPS in Ireland also does not monitor user satisfaction and, instead, only tracks official complaints, of which there were none in 2023. Germany's 115 service does not centrally

monitor customer satisfaction and based on the available data; it is unclear how this is managed at a local level.

3.3 Cost and staff expertise (including multilingualism)

3.3.1 Staff qualifications, experience and multilingualism

The qualifications and experience required of staff handling enquiries depends on the type of service being offered by the contact centre. The centres providing more complex legal or technical guidance have the most stringent requirements in terms of staff knowledge and experience. For example, Allo Public in France requires staff to have significant expertise and experience in a relevant area, typically with some legal knowledge, to ensure they can deliver appropriate legal information. Similarly, staff at the Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria must have good knowledge of Austrian politics and administration. The Estonian contact centre, which focuses on technical support, mandates that staff have an education or diploma in IT and good technical knowledge. The Citizens Information Phone Service in Ireland requires staff to be familiar with Irish social welfare, employment law, housing and/or other relevant public service systems in Ireland.

Conversely, the contact centres that deal with large volumes of general enquiries, including a significant proportion of straightforward queries, such as 115 in Germany and Borgers Contact Centre in Denmark, do not have such strict requirements, although, these contact centres still aim to hire staff with relevant experience.

None of the public contact centres has a requirement for staff to be educated to university level. However, the French contact centre requires substantial experience without an HE qualification. Most centres reported that they hire a mix of post-18 school-leavers and university graduates. The Danish contact centre also hires students on sabbaticals to process simpler enquiries. Language skills are seen as desirable, but the majority of centres do not have a strict requirement for staff to have a second language. The Danish contact centre, however, requires proficiency in English as well as Danish. Several public contact centres reported that English is the most commonly spoken second-language.

3.3.2 Factors which drive costs

The public contact centres reported that there were two main areas that drove costs: staffing and technology.

Staffing is a major cost. The qualifications and expertise required (as discussed above in Section 3.3.1) as well as the local employment markets have an impact on the overall costs of staffing. In terms of the utilisation of staff resource, all of the public contact centres said they were focused on maximising efficiency and streamlining processes as far as possible, while maintaining the quality of responses. There are also further, less predictable, costs linked to staff absences and staff attrition (issues which are discussed in Section 3.4.1).

The costs of maintaining IT technologies and other overheads related to infrastructure are the other major area of expenditure. However, there is some variation in terms of approaches to future investment in technology in the public sector. While the public contact centres that were part of ministries for digitalisation were generally satisfied with the provision of technology, those located in other types of ministries felt this was an area that could be invested in more and that they were falling behind the private sector. For example, the manager of the CIPS in Ireland reported that funding requests to the government for updates and improvements to technology had been declined.

3.4 HR Metrics, activity and knowledge management

3.4.1 Staff attrition and absence rates

The pay and conditions of staff are a major challenge for many public contact centres. Those contact centres with lower pay and high call volumes reported issues with staff satisfaction and retention, especially those located in areas where there is a buoyant job market.

Problems in this area are particularly acute for the Irish CIPS, which has experienced industrial action and high levels of staff absence during the past 12 months. Other centres, such as Portugal and the Netherlands, reported that experienced staff are likely to move on to better-paid roles elsewhere. High levels of staff attrition create additional challenges and costs due to increased recruitment and training needs.

Even some of the contact centres that are relatively well-resourced and directly employ staff, such as Austria and Germany, still struggle with staff attrition. The centre which reported fewest issues with staff attrition was the Allo Service Public in France, where staff are public servants, work in specialised areas, and are assigned windows of time during the week to respond to emails.

3.4.2 Staff satisfaction

Several public contact centres reported that they monitor employee morale via job satisfaction surveys. The Danish contact centre circulates employee satisfaction surveys every three months, and their average satisfaction rate is 4.3/5. The larger department, within which the French Allo Service Public is positioned, has an overall job satisfaction score of 6.8/10. The other public contact centres did not share data on staff satisfaction, so it is not possible to infer any wider trends.

3.4.3 Remote and hybrid working

While many contact centres moved to remote working during the pandemic, public centres now have a range of policies on onsite vs remote working. Some centres are entirely in-person (Denmark), others are hybrid (Germany), and many offer staff the choice to work remotely or onsite (Estonia, France, Ireland). Most reported that training was delivered in-person.

3.4.4 Knowledge management

Knowledge management was one of the major challenges identified by several public contact centres. The responsibility for ensuring information share with citizens is accurate and current is often shared between the contact centre and related government departments and/or services.

Contact Centres have different systems in place for management of knowledge. In the case of France's Allo Service Public, there is no knowledge management system separate to what is publicly available. Other contact centres have knowledge management systems in place, managed by the contact centre, but rely on data provided by other government bodies.

An aspect which is important to some contact centres is the use of the knowledge which stems from the contact centre to improve the knowledge which is publicly available. This approach is seen to help citizens reaching the relevant information, but also ultimately to help decrease the number of incoming contacts.

In the case of Allo Service Public, the knowledge of the contact centre is directly capitalised on. Agents have access to, but are also responsible for the updating of the part of ServicePublic.fr which cover the topical areas for which the contact centre is responsible.

In the Danish case, responsible ministries can “listen in” to conversations to gain firsthand knowledge of the enquiries. This system allows specific agencies to understand better the nature of enquiries, but importantly also form the basis for tailoring of the reporting formats to responsible ministries, for subsequent use.

3.5 Channels

3.5.1 Channel usage

The majority of the public contact centres in the sample provide phone and email services, with some also responding to queries submitted by webchat, WhatsApp, social media and postal letter. Only the public contact centres in Austria and Germany focus solely on phone enquiries. All services collect data on the total number of enquiries received, with all contact centres apart from Estonia's Riigiportaal²¹ collecting accurate data on the number of enquiries by channel (phone, email, chat, social media etc) (Table 7).

Table 7 – Breakdown of enquiries by type (2023)

Contact Centre	Total Yearly Enquiries	Phone	Email	Social media	Web Chat	Enquiries / agent / year ²²
Citizen Service of the Federal Chancellery of Austria	6,430	6,430	-	-	-	1,286
Borger's Contact Centre, Denmark	739,569 (931,149²³)	588,946	150,623	-	-	9,000
Riigiportaal, Estonia	70,000	35,000 ²⁴	35,000	-	-	6,363
Contact Centre of Service Public, France	276,000	246,600	30,000	-	-	6,273
115, Germany	5,631,463	5,631,463	-	-	-	7,039
Citizen Information Phone Service, Ireland	135,477	133,258	-	1,981	238 ²⁵	7,524
Informatie Rijksoverheid, The Netherlands	221,000	150,000	45,000	26,000	-	4,420
AMA Portugal	979,086	899,872	75,264	1,731 ²⁶	2,219	9,325

Source: Data supplied by the contact centres, analysis by the consortium

Even for digital-first services, the phone remains the primary way that enquiries are made by citizens. As can be seen in Figure 5, email accounts for a particularly large proportion of the EDCC's enquiries. For the public contact centres that cover email, this channel accounts for less than 50% of total enquiries.

²¹ Estonia's Riigiportaal could only provide a rough estimate of total enquiries and approximate split between phone and

²² Where figures were not shared, estimates are based on total enquiries divided by total FTE agents

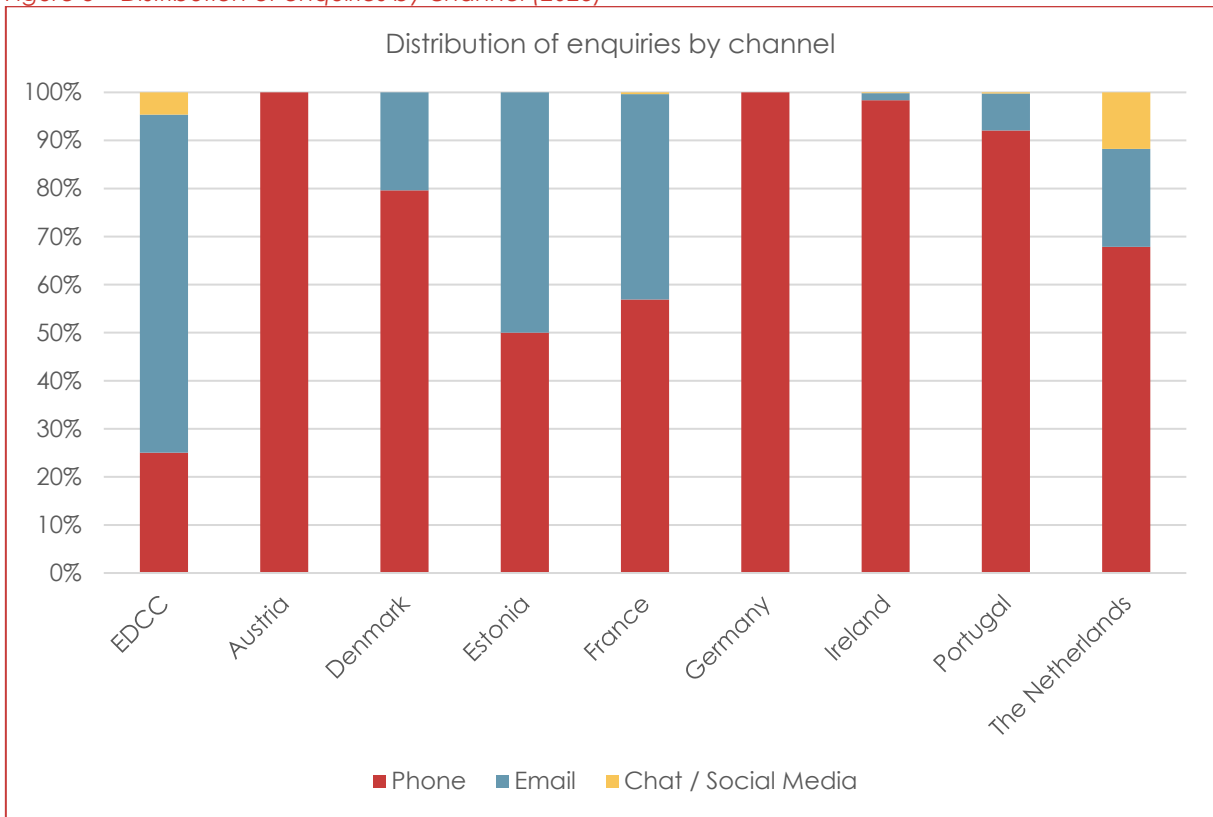
²³ Total includes phone contacts which did not go through to an agent.

²⁴ Figures based on an estimated 50:50 split between phone and email.

²⁵ The CID provides webchat for users who have hearing or speech difficulties or who may have difficulties using the telephone.

²⁶ Video call.

Figure 5 – Distribution of enquiries by channel (2023)



Source: Data supplied by the contact centres, analysis by the consortium

Several contact centres indicated a strong preference for phone or digital chat over email. To some extent this is cost related, with emails typically involving more correspondence and taking longer to resolve. The contact centre in the Netherlands, for example, estimates the costs per enquiry are €7 for phone and €8 for email. Difficulties around ensuring the quality and accuracy of emails, as well as lower levels of user satisfaction for emails, were also identified as issues. The Danish contact centre, for example, reported considerably lower satisfaction for email (62.3%), compared with the phone (90.6%). Similarly, the Dutch contact centre reported satisfaction scores of 3.65/5 for email, compared with 4.51/5 for calls.

3.5.2 Use of social media messaging

The public contact centres generally do not engage with enquiries via social media. A major concern is privacy and data protection, especially given the nature of certain queries, which relate to personal information.

The Netherlands' contact centre is the notable exception, offering citizens the opportunity to send messages via X, Facebook or WhatsApp. Presumably to mitigate privacy issues, the centre also states that users should not share personal data such as their citizen service number via social media. The Dutch government website also features several warnings about potential scams, involving direct messages spoofing the Public Information Service's accounts.

Aside from GDPR issues, there are risks relating to the practicalities and potential costs of communication with citizens via social media. The Netherlands contact centre has had to limit the types of enquiries sent via social media. Its website stipulates clearly that these platforms are for questions only and their agents will not respond to opinions. Nor will they respond to group chats on WhatsApp. Even with these limits set, there are challenges created by promoting these channels. Compared to a conventional in-browser chat, which is closed by

an agent once a query is addressed, these services provide greater opportunity for back-and-forth contact. Complex queries take up agents' time and make it more challenging to mark enquiries as resolved. The Netherlands contact centre estimates the cost per query is €4 for a simple WhatsApp chat, but up to €20 for more complex WhatsApp enquiries, a fivefold increase.

3.6 Technology and AI

3.6.1 Knowledge management and business intelligence

As already noted, knowledge management is challenge for many public contact centres. Effectively designed and coordinated knowledge management systems offer the potential to improve information sharing and cooperation across services, ministries and departments linked to the contact centres. Moreover, once these systems are established, there is potential to use AI/machine learning tools to help agents identify information more quickly and to also use them to help add to or update knowledge banks.

The collection of robust performance data, not only on the efficiency of agents but also on the quality of responses, provides significant opportunities for learning and, thereby, the improvement of services. Evidently, the approach to data collection amongst public contact centres is somewhat inconsistent. However, there are examples of centres that have developed robust systems and IT infrastructure for data collection, with the aim of improving services. The Danish contact centre, for example, uses non-AI business intelligence to refine services. It has developed sets of common reporting criteria and tailored criteria for specific services. These include bespoke registration systems for different enquiries, which are designed by the back-office teams of the nine services. The services also listen in to calls, for a week, to improve their understanding of enquiries and identify ways to improve online information.

3.6.2 Use of AI and machine learning

Public contact centres have not yet adopted technologies using AI and machine learning. Several centres reported that while they were in the preliminary stages of looking into how AI and machine learning could be used, they did not have any immediate plans to adopt new technologies.

Where activity related to AI is currently taking place, it is largely in the testing and pilot stages. For example, the Danish Contact Centre is currently testing Capturi, an AI conversation analysis tool, to analyse call data to identify trends, optimise processes, and improve performance, with an aim to fully implement the system by late 2024/early 2025. This technology has the potential to help reduce call durations, improve the accuracy of information shared by call handlers and, also, to more rapidly detect bugs in IT solutions.

Many public contact centres expressed scepticism about the use of chatbots, despite their use in the private contact centre industry to improve efficiency. Some expressed concerns about the quality and accuracy of responses generated. Others suggested that many people prefer human interaction. This said, the Germany contact centre stated that they were training an AI chatbot to automate certain tasks. However, as already noted, this contact centre processes a large volume of simple enquiries, for which this type of technology may be appropriate.



4 Findings of Strand 2: Trends in the contact centre profession

This section of the report addresses strand 2 of the study: key trends in the overall contact centre industry. The section covers key industry standards, with the aim to benchmark the EDCC against other entities providing contact centre services.

The section also covers current strategic developments in the contact centre profession, trends in communication channels (including citizens preference), knowledge management and use of artificial intelligence (AI). Among other, the following questions are covered:

- Which channels and context would citizens like to use to get factual information in the future?
- How should the EDCC use Artificial Intelligence in knowledge management in the future, based on evidence from the contact centre profession in general?

To cover key trends in the contact centre industry and to benchmark EDCC services in a systematic fashion, the section draws on two key sources:

- ContactBabel's data (ongoing survey data) and analysis covering 358 UK contact centres.²⁷ These surveys have been carried out in the 2023-2024 period.
- Semi-structured interviews with European contact centres and representative associations of contact centres, from across Europe

The quantitative analysis presented below is segmented by "Small Inbound Service" operations ("SIS") and "overall industry". "SIS" contact centres have the following characteristics:

- Size: 15-60 seats / agent positions
- Activity: Majority inbound (>90%), at least 90% service-orientated (rather than sales)
- Vertical markets / business sectors: those more concerned with helpdesks rather than account-based service or sales. e.g. public sector, manufacturing, IT helpdesks.

"Overall industry" figures are included to provide a view of what the contact centre industry as a whole looks like, and to compare how and why this is different to SIS operations.

Where possible, data from EDCC, SIS contact centres and the contact centre industry average have been directly compared to give a view on comparative performance.

The main findings of the section are as follows:

EDCC performance benchmarked against industry standards

Overall, the EDCC's metrics are superior to SIS operations and the industry as a whole in operational performance, and key HR agent metrics. Email response time appears broadly similar to other operations (although the metrics captured are not directly comparable).

EDCC talk time / post-call activity is very different from other contact centre operations, and cost per interaction is significantly higher. Aspects which likely drive-up costs are the superior operational metrics, the nature of the work (i.e. complexity of questions and answers) and

²⁷ UK data has been used as the level of current and historical contact centre data required for this report is only available for the UK. Like the Western and Northern Europe contact centre industries, the UK is a mature market with considerable use of technology with similar salaries, costs and business issues. Please note that ContactBabel carried out a large-scale survey of mainland European contact centres in 2017, and many operational key statistics from mature Western and Northern European contact centres were similar to the UK. Since then, there is no evidence to suggest that a major divergence would exist, as businesses have faced similar challenges (the pandemic, inflation, a move to digital channels, cost pressures, AI, etc.).

multilingual services. However, even when considering these aspects, costs appear to be significantly higher than industry averages.

It may be the case that EDCC agents have more time between interactions (idle time), which usually accounts for only 5-10% of the time in the typical contact centre.

Table 8 - Key metrics comparison and summary – EDCC, SIS and overall contact centre industry

Metric	SIS	Overall	Assessment
Average speed to answer (seconds)	145	116	EDCC far above industry standard
Call abandonment rate	10.6%	8.4%	EDCC far above industry standard. NB – EDCC figures here include all abandoned calls, although in the outsource reporting, only those abandoned after > 30 seconds are included (4.4%)
First-contact resolution rate	78%	78%	FCR is primarily an internal metric. EDCC far above industry standard, but the EDCC appears not to track follow-up requests.
Call duration (talk time only)	352	421	EDCC similar to similar operations, shorter calls than industry average
Talk time / post-interaction activity	75% / 25%	78% / 22%	EDCC spends far more time on post-call work
Channel use: Telephone Email Social media / messaging	61% 27% 3%	64% 19% 4%	Emails are far more important to EDCC than to other operations
Agent attrition rate (annual)	19%	23%	EDCC attrition lower than similar operations and much lower than industry average
Agent absence rate	6.0%	6.2%	EDCC absence much lower than similar operations and industry average
Email handling time	63% in 1 day	66% in 1 day	Not directly comparable, but EDCC appears of similar standard
Messaging handling time	42% within 2 hours	56% within 2 hours	Not directly comparable, but EDCC appears of similar standard

Source: Analysis by ContactBabel

How should the EDCC use Artificial Intelligence based on evidence from the contact centre profession

Based on the data and comparing the EDCC to SIS contact centres and the industry in general, there does not appear to be an obvious opportunity for the EDCC to improve the quality of its telephony operational performance. However, there is an opportunity to reduce the time spent on post-call work, which accounts for 65% of the overall interaction time. AI-generated post-call notes and automated call classification could assist the EDCC with this.

The majority of the EDCC's inbound interactions, however, are through email. The actual time spent on reading emails, searching for information, composing emails and reporting is currently 15.3 minutes on average. Through implementation of AI features such as automated information retrieval, there are likely options to decrease handling time using AI. This could be done through templatization or more likely, the application of AI natural language understanding to emails, automated information retrieval applied to the knowledge base, and AI powered suggestions for replies, which agents can then amend and send. The systematic use of automated translation for drafting and reporting should further help decrease reporting time. It is the contractor's estimate that the effective implementation of such tools could drive down handling time beyond the estimates/targets set for efficiency gains under the current contact for implementation of AI features on the EDCC knowledge base.²⁸

AI can also be used to update knowledge bases on an ongoing and cumulatively beneficial basis, gathering information from customer surveys as to which responses have been most successful for citizens, and disseminating this information across channels.

Although a small number of businesses do use AI to handle enquiries without any agent intervention, it is unlikely that this would be appropriate for the EDCC at this stage. It is not envisaged widely in the contact centre industry as a whole that AI will result in widespread loss of agent positions, but rather than it will augment the existing structure: reducing costs and improving outcomes.

Which channels and context would citizens like to use to get factual information?

While phone remains the dominant channel, the contact centre industry as a whole has seen a movement away from telephony and towards digital channels (especially email and web chat), with an increasing use of self-service. Web chat has the advantage over email of being a synchronous channel, which allows multiple back-and-forth questioning and clarification on a single short interaction, taking minutes rather than days.

However, customers report that their preference for the telephony channel in cases of high emotion, urgency and complexity is actually increasing. We have no reason to forecast any major decline in the telephony channel as a whole in the foreseeable future.

Due to the uptake of self-service, the average interaction handled by an agent in any channel is more complex and lengthier than it has been in the past. This will continue unless solutions such as AI are put into place to assist these agents. AI will play its part in assisting agents (both on voice and digital channels), and also through self-service (chatbots and voice bots), but this is in its relative infancy.

Many organisations – both public and private sector – state that moving enquiries from agent-supported channels (whether digital or voice) to self-service is a priority for them, both in terms of providing better information and using automation such as chatbots and voicebots. It is worth noting that 20-25% of customers calling a contact centre have tried and failed to solve their issue online first, also that only 9% of customers state that web self-service is their preferred contact channel for solving complex queries.

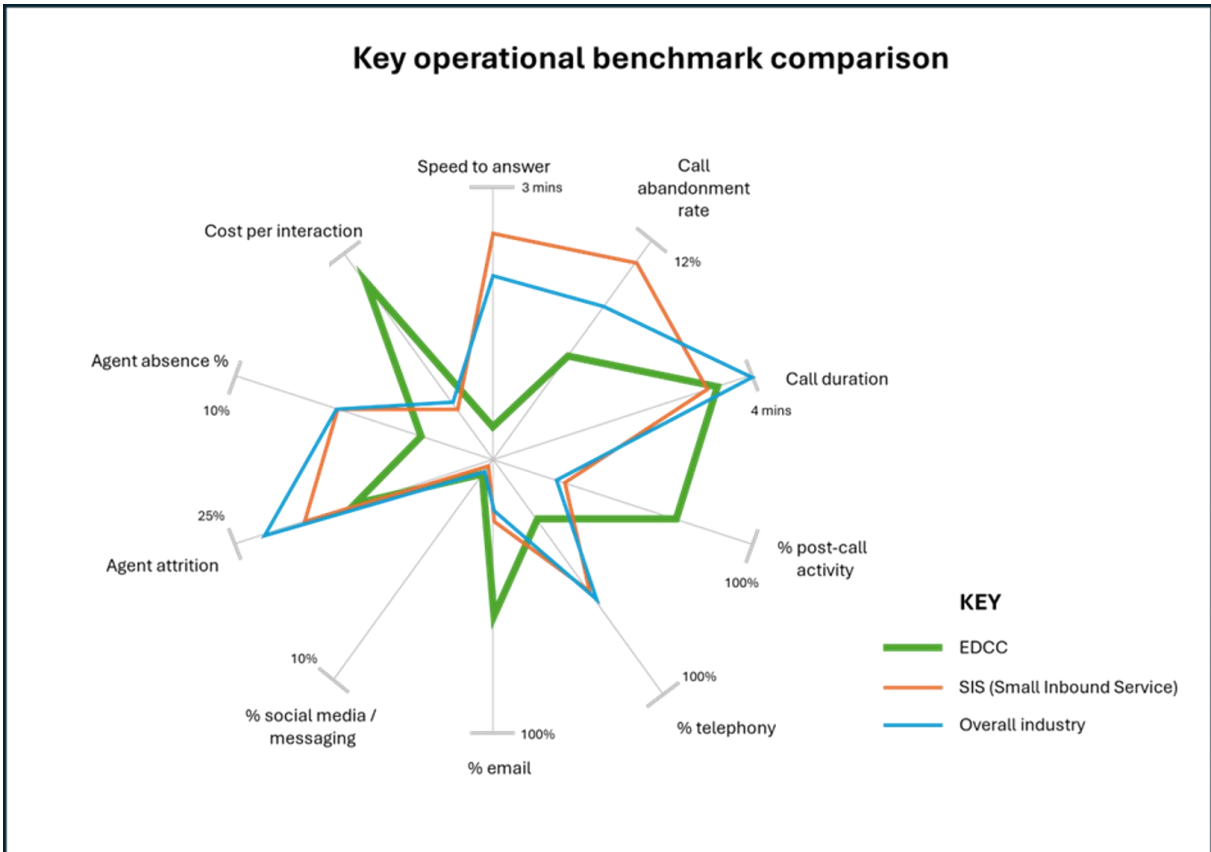
Messaging (including SMS, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp etc) is rarely more than a very minor support channel, with only 3% of customers choosing to use this as their primary channel for complex enquiries.

²⁸ See section 1.

4.1 Operational Benchmarks

The following chart displays the main operational, performance and HR benchmarks for EDCC, SIS and the overall contact centre industry.

It shows that while EDCC outperforms in terms of many contacts centre performance and HR metrics, there is a substantial cost associated with this. It also shows that EDCC's post-call activity, and email / phone interactions is significantly different from SIS or overall industry operations.



4.1.1 Speed to answer

Average speed to answer (ASA) plays a vital part in improving the customer experience, and also feeds into other performance measures such as call abandonment rate.

SIS contact centres, being smaller, tend to have fewer economies of scale and lower use of technology, so a higher-than-average ASA would be expected. Historically, the industry average ASA was around 20-30 seconds, but rose during the pandemic and remains high. SIS operations report an average customer wait time of 145 seconds, compared to 116 at an industry-wide level. Both of these figures are considerably higher than historical norms and show little sign of dropping.

EDCC reports 82.1% of calls are answered in 30 seconds and an average speed to answer of 18 seconds, which is of a very high standard.

4.1.2 Call abandonment rate

Call abandonment rate links directly to customer satisfaction, cost, average speed to answer and revenue, and is widely seen as one of the most important and complete key performance indicators that a contact centre has at its disposal.

As with ASA, SIS abandonment rates (10.6%) are higher than the industry average of 8.4%, as they are closely linked to average speed to answer.

EDCC reports a 5.5% call abandonment rate²⁹ which is far superior to SIS operations and the overall contact centre industry. This figure includes all abandoned calls and is used to compare directly with other operations, whereas the data provided by the outsource provider shows the percentage of abandoned calls after more than 30 seconds (4.4%).

4.1.3 First-contact resolution rate (FCR)

The ability to understand a query and deal with it in a reasonable timeframe at the first time of asking is seen as the key to customer satisfaction, in that it reduces the overall number of calls while providing the customer with a good experience which will impact on the company's overall performance. Along with short queue times, FCR is consistently stated to be the main driver of positive customer experience (CX). Among the industry partners consulted, FCR is stated to be one of the most frequently used key measures of success.

FCR of 75-80% tends to be typical, with little distribution away from a wider band of 70-85% as a rule. SIS contact centres report FCR of 78%, which is the same as the contact centre industry as a whole. Interviewees note that that phone and chat tends to have higher FCR, email lower. It should be noted that FCR is an internal metric with many different ways to be measured, and while some organisations (and indeed, customers) may require an issue to be solved with a single email for it to be an FCR, others will permit multiple back-and-forth emails until the issue is resolved to the customer's satisfaction, in the same way as a web chat or phone conversation.

Overall, emails (or webforms) are seen to increase the risk of misunderstanding or providing incomplete answers, driving down FCR. This feature, along with the perceived efficiency gains of chats compared to phone is driving a gradual expansion of web chat functionality across several of the contact centres consulted qualitatively.

EDCC reports that 94.6% of the questions are answered by first contact, which is far in excess of what either SIS operations or the overall contact centre industry reports. However, this indicator measures the share of enquiries which are dealt with by the EDCC (rather than by back offices). The EDCC does not measure returning contacts. The survey data collected (see Section 5), however, suggests that about 5% of the incoming callers, 15% of those having sent a mail, and 9% of those having used the chat intend to contact the EDCC again to address their question. While not directly comparable, these figures suggest that the EDCC performs above industry average as regards this indicator.

4.1.4 Call transfer rate

This metric can indicate training needs at the individual agent level, a failure in the initial IVR routing or a need to update FAQs or other information on a website (for example, a spike in this metric might be driven by a recent marketing campaign which has confused some customers, creating a high level of calls about the same issue).

²⁹ Calculated as total abandoned calls (not only calls abandoned >30s)

Call transfer for SIS operations tracks the overall contact centre industry very closely, being less than one percentage point lower. Smaller operations (such as SIS) will tend to have fewer alternative departments or teams to pass calls onto, so lower transfer rates would make sense. SIS operations report call transfer rates of 6.2% in 2023, against 6.9% industry wide.

4.1.5 Service call duration

Contact Centre representatives note talk time duration is increasing. As within the public sector, many commercial contact centres aim to encourage their users to utilise self-service options for simple enquiries, whether through online services or chatbots. This feature drives down the number of simple questions, leaving more complex and time resource intensive questions for agents.

While call duration has dropped in importance as a metric for contact centre success, it impacts upon those seen as more important, such as queue time and call abandonment rates.

SIS operations tend to have lower call durations than average (currently 352 seconds or almost 6 minutes), as they are focused on providing generic information rather than specific account-based service. As such, they may not usually require time spent in taking callers through security or accessing their accounts. Average service call duration industry-wide is over a minute longer (421 seconds).

EDCC reports an average talk time of 6.0 minutes (360 seconds), very similar to SIS operations, and this average talk time is similar to many of the contact centres consulted qualitatively. Technical support calls however tend to be longer (7 to 10 minutes).

4.1.6 Response time digital channels

Emails. SIS operations have seen an improvement in the proportion of emails taking more than a day to answer (37% compared to 56% in 2020), which is positive for a sector which handles a substantial proportion of interactions through this channel.

The overall contact centre industry has seen a gradual improvement in email response times. Survey data for the overall industry suggest that 66% of mails were answered within one day in 2023. The share is somewhat lower for SIS operations, but smaller centres have seen an improvement in the proportion of emails which are addressed within one day (63% in 2023 up from 54% in 2020). The target of a day to reply is, judging from the interviews undertaken, relatively standard within the industry.

EDCC has a target to reply to all mails within 3 days. It reports an average email handling time of 2.9 days. The EDCC appears to provide replies less quickly than the contact centre industry and has lower standards for response time. However, EDCC is not directly comparable to the overall contact centre industry and SIS operations, which report the proportion of emails handled within a certain time, rather than a specific average. Please see Appendix B for more detail on this.

Web chat Judging from both survey results and interviews, web chats are becoming longer. Almost half of web chats into SIS operations take longer than five minutes to complete. The share is higher for the industry overall (51%). This compares to 24% in 2020 for SIS contact centres, and 42% for the industry overall. This reverses a pattern seen in years earlier than this where it appeared that web chats were being used for simple interaction types. This is no longer the case.

While web chats are becoming more complex, it is also the case that more companies are now asking their agents to run multiple concurrent web chats, which drives up time to response.

Moreover, the use of automated chatbots in smaller operations tends to be lower, which increases the likeliness of longer chats.

Social media. The rise of social media as a customer service channel has often been de facto, in that customers have actively sought out the company's Facebook page or Twitter/X account to communicate with it, even if the company originally had a social media presence only to disseminate information.

Response times for handling a social media customer service request are somewhere between a phone call / web chat on the one hand (e.g. a maximum of a few minutes), and an email on the other (e.g. next working day).

Industry-wide, the proportion of social media service requests for which the response time is longer than two hours has increased from 26% in 2020 to 44% in 2023. SIS operations report that 58% of social media service requests take longer than two hours.

EDCC's average messaging handling time is 0.3 days (which we assume to be c. 2.5 - 3 hours), which is roughly comparable to SIS operations, and slightly higher than industry average.

4.1.7 Agent activity

Agent activity per hour is a key structural metric aimed at helping contact centre management understand how the agent's time is being spent.

We have focused on the amount of time spent on a telephone call:

- Talk time: amount of time actually spent on the inbound call
- Post-call wrap-up: after-call data input and actions driven specifically by that call.

The contact centre industry as a whole, and SIS contact centres have a similar agent activity. 75-78% is talk time. 22-25% is spent on post-call work. This weighting is similar to that found among contact centres consulted qualitatively – where wrap up time for phone calls range 10-25% of the time spent. In absolute numbers, wrap up time typically ranges from 30s to 1m. For longer calls (7 to 10 minutes for example in the case of tech support calls), acceptable wrap up time may be up to 2 minutes.

The structure of EDCC calls is considerably different to that the contact centre industry. Based on the reporting data, an average of 35% of total enquiry time is spent in talking to callers and 65% spent on post-call work such as classifying the case, writing notes and references, and providing any further information, such as sending emails. This feature drives up average handling time, well beyond average within the industry. In 2023 average handling time for a phone call including wrap up was reported at 17m 58s³⁰ - of which nearly 12 minutes is post-call work.

Similar observations may be made for email. Email treatment time, reported by interviewees, range 5 minutes (including wrap up time). Overall, emails are seen to require shorter handling time than calls, but at the cost of lower FTR (first-time resolution). Again, the reported overall industry handling time is much shorter than the EDCC average handling time which stands at 15m 12s.

³⁰ 17.97 min

4.2 Cost and multilingualism

4.2.1 Cost per interaction

Cost per interaction is a very difficult metric to work out for a business, and even more difficult to benchmark in any meaningful way, as calls can vary massively in cost even within the same contact centre, and there is no universal agreement over which elements of cost to include within this metric. Like first-contact resolution rates, if it is used as an internal metric and measured the same way each year, it could provide a more accurate long-term view of the operation's trajectory.

Average cost per interaction in the UK contact centre industry range €4.5 to €6.5. Cost per call is lower in SIS operations (€4.96) compared to €6.43 industry wide. The cost differential between channels in SIS operations tends to be less than the industry average, as telephony calls are shorter and cheaper, and there is less use of digital automation. Web chat costs are higher in SIS contact centres (€5.09) compared to €3.52 for the contact centre industry as a whole, probably as the latter has a higher use of chatbots. Emails are a similar cost for both groups at €3.76 for SIS and €4.09 for the overall industry, whereas social media customer service requests are higher in SIS operations (€3.37) than industry-wide (€2.59), although in both cases this channel is the cheapest.

As it could be expected, there is variation in unit costs across Europe, with higher costs reported in countries such as the Netherlands (up to €10) and lower costs in countries such as Greece or Poland. The relative higher costs of phone vs. other channels are confirmed through interviews with the industry. There is mostly also consensus that web chat is cheaper. Higher cost efficiency of web chats however require that agents deal with simultaneous chat enquiries at the same time and/or that templating is used. One industry partner also noted efficiency benefits from the use of automated translation in chat³¹.

Compared to the averages found across the industry the EDCC reports a far higher cost per interaction

Higher costs are in line with superior operational metrics, and longer handling time compared to the industry. It appears that the higher quality of service from EDCC comes at a significantly higher cost. The complexity of the work, need for multilingual agents and long post-call activity are also likely to be factors in this. The much lower volume of enquiries compared to other services may play a role, as the fixed costs involved with knowledge management and telephony / IT are included as part of the EDCC's cost per interaction calculation. The question of the EDCC unit costs charged to the Commission, is further discussed in Section 6.

4.2.2 Multilingualism and costs implications

Stakeholders consulted providing multi-lingual support, note that there is a cost premium for multilingual services. Many of these contact centre operators are outsourcers. Most noted that that the payment model they used for multilingual services is that of cost per hour by language building on the forecast, rather than a cost per enquiry.

The baseline cost for multilingual services usually refers to English or the language of the country in which the centre is located. Premium costs on other languages vary: English does not significantly increase costs, but other languages do. The cost model varies by language, with most expensive languages (such as Nordic languages) seeing up to a 40%-50% premium based

³¹ i.e. the agent reply in one language, which is automatically translated and sent in another language.

on demand, rarity and additional skills required. More common languages (e.g. German, Italian or French) involve lower premiums.

Interviewees note that multilingual agents have higher salaries, due to their different professional backgrounds and qualifications. However, several interviewees from across Europe also noted that bilingualism (English and another language) is often a standard among larger scale outsourcers, as many operate in English.

4.3 HR Metrics, activity and knowledge management

4.3.1 Agent attrition rate

SIS contact centres – being smaller than average – will tend to have lower agent attrition rates than the industry as a whole, as there is a strong positive correlation between high attrition and large contact centre size. SIS operations report 19% agent attrition rates, against 23% industry wide.

At a 14.1% attrition rate, EDCC attrition is lower than similar operations and much lower than industry average.

Attrition and recruitment are particular challenges for multilingual services where agents often have higher qualifications, expectations and alternative employment opportunities. This makes retention a critical focus area. Attrition in multilingual roles can be more challenging due to the higher expectations and less flexible nature of these roles as agents cannot be replaced as easily.

4.3.2 Agent absence rate

Short-term (no-show) absence is the average number of agent days lost through short-term sickness and unauthorised absence as a percentage of contracted days annually.

SIS operations show very steady agent absence rates, at 6.0% in 2023 which is similar to recent years. Smaller operations will usually report lower absence rates than the industry average, which is 6.2% this year.

At a 3.7% absence rate, EDCC absence is lower than similar operations and lower than the overall industry average.

4.3.3 Staff satisfaction

Contact Centres generally have active staff engagement policies in place to minimise attrition and absence. The use of staff satisfaction measures – along with other actions such as one to one feedback or consultation on improvements are widespread in the industry. Some also encourages feedback through ideas and bonuses for good suggestions. Staff satisfaction surveys are deployed at least once yearly (often twice), but collection of feedback can be as frequent as every second week (usually in the form of qualitative feedback).

Critical to such measures, is the use of staff feedback. Interviewees highlight that explicitly showing how staff feedback is acted upon is more important than the staff satisfaction measure itself. As such, staff satisfaction is generally more of an internal measure than one which outsourcers report to clients.

4.3.4 Remote & hybrid working

The massive growth in remote working was driven in large part by the pandemic: in 2020 and 2021, all SIS survey respondents used remote or hybrid working, and 75% of SIS operations now

have their agents working at home at least some of the time. There is certainly no rush amongst survey respondents to return to the centralised model. In fact, our forecast is that more than half of agents will spend at least part of their time working at home.

At an industry level, there is little real difference from SIS operations. The forecast is that a slightly higher proportion of contact centres will have all agents back in a centralised location, but again, the majority will have agents working at home at least some of the time.

Findings are similar in the industry interviews undertaken. Hybrid and remote working has become the norm across Europe. Many centres operate a hybrid model, where the majority of the work time is at home. A significant number, however, use a fully remote working model, although the induction period usually takes place at a centralised location. Where fully remote working is used, training is also remote – although many interviewees stress the need for centralised onboarding. Where hybrid working is used, training usually takes place in a central location.

Hybrid and fully remote working models are seen as critical for employee retention. Remote working is also seen to help attract language skills, and to help retention specifically for multilingual staff. Some interviewees however also acknowledge that fully remote setups require robust processes and careful management, especially for multilingual roles where language-specific performance metrics are tracked closely.

4.3.5 Knowledge management

All industry partners consulted providing inhouse services have knowledge bases in place. Different systems are used (e.g. Khoros, NICE). In contrast, outsourcers generally note that the knowledge bases of the clients are used as a basis for service delivery.

Some outsourcers note that while knowledge management systems can be built in collaboration with the clients, it is preferable that clients own the knowledge base and the knowledge management system. Client ownership and management has multiple benefits including ensuring consistency and accuracy of the information and ensuring consistent use and control of glossary, terms and content.

It is noted that adequate investment into the knowledge base, by the contracting service, is vital, and even more so, if it is to form the basis for development of AI based solutions.

4.4 Channels

4.4.1 Channel usage within the contact centre industry

Inbound channels for contact centres have evolved slowly, with telephony still dominating although email has grown to be an important channel for many. While social media has been added as a customer service channel, its integration and usage remain relatively limited in scope.

The use of inbound channels in SIS contact centres has stayed fairly steady in the past nine years, with live telephone dropping only by around five percentage points to around 61%. There has been an increase in email (26.8%) and web chat (4.1%), and a decline in fax to almost zero. Levels of telephony self-service are very low (2.0%).

Going forward, data from the different sources suggest that web chat can be expected to represent a larger share of incoming enquiries across the industry. Many interviewees indicate recent expansion or the desire to expand the usage of chat, citing higher user satisfaction, high FCR, and lower costs as the main reasons. However, data also suggests that this push is less in

smaller inbound contact centres. Moreover, for urgent or complex enquiries, the telephone remains the channel of choice.

Demographic variations are noted. There is a more pronounced preference for chat among younger groups, and a preference for phone among older groups. Some interviewees moreover note variation in channel preference across Member States.

Overall, the expectation is that phone will remain the top channel of choice, and email is likely to continue to be the most important digital channel, although web chat is on the rise. Social media channels are expected to remain marginal.

Compared to the overall trends in the contact centre industry, EDCC shows a different pattern: reporting 70% email, 25% telephone and 5% messaging. There is far more focus on email than phone. There is also much more widespread use of messaging apps. However, similar to the industry overall, changes in channel usage are overall modest, although a decrease in telephony was noted at the time of the introduction of messenger services.

4.4.2 *Instant messaging channels offered for customer service*

Social media, and instant messaging as customer service channels are often offered by organisations although the take-up by customers is not generally very high. Across the surveyed contact centres, 1.8% of inbound interactions stem from messenger apps and other form of social media channels and are much lower in SIS operations than in the industry as a whole (0.4% vs 1.8% of inbound interactions at the end of 2023) – although smaller SIS operations are more likely to offer some forms of instant messaging than the industry as a whole³².

Interview results confirm survey results. Use of social media and messenger apps are marginal across most contact centres. When used, WhatsApp, and to a smaller measure Viber are preferred channels, associated with better protection as regards user data, security, and privacy compared to channels such as Facebook Messenger and Instagram.

Use of Facebook Messenger, Instagram and similar channels are marginal for inbound customer service – unless customer services are targeted to and designed for Millennials and Gen Z and closely related to sales. For other contact centres, messenger apps such as Facebook Messenger and Instagram are reported used mostly by users in the context of complaints, rather than as sources of information. As such few contact centres have dedicated social media customer service team attached to their social media outreach.

The EDCC reports an average of around 4-5% of inbound interactions being through messaging. While this is relatively low compared to the rest of its channels, it is still substantially higher than the averages found within the industry.

4.4.3 *Towards omnichannel*

“Omnichannel” describes the goal of customers being able to contact (and be contacted) through any channel – switching between them during the interaction as appropriate, while taking any relevant data and history along with them – with a single, unified view of the customer's journey.

For the purposes of describing how far along the omnichannel process our survey respondents are, those who offer multiple communication channels to customers were asked to place themselves into one of three categories:

³² Facebook Messenger (55% EDCC / 43% overall) and Instagram (28% / 22%).

- Multichannel: “We offer a choice of channels to customers (i.e. several of voice, email, social media, web chat), from which they can use one in a single interaction. If they change channel, the context and history is lost”
- Multimodal: “We offer a choice of channels, and customers can use more than one in the same interaction (e.g. an agent can send an email or SMS to a customer while they are talking on the phone)”
- Omnichannel: “We offer a choice of channels, and can use more than one over multiple interactions, while retaining the history and context of the original enquiry. Relevant information follows the customer across channels and interactions”.

58% of SIS contact centres are multichannel, with a gradual movement towards omnichannel being seen. 31% of contact centres overall describe themselves as omnichannel, up from 24% in 2020.

While the use of digital channel customer support is high in SIS operations, the technology and business changes required to implement full omnichannel is less likely to be present.

This is to be expected as the average contact centre is larger and has a greater number of digital interactions and larger budgets to invest in the solutions required for omnichannel (as opposed to point solutions covering a single digital channel).

4.4.4 Customer channel preference

A 2023 ContactBabel survey of 1,000 UK consumers attempted to understand which the channels of preference would be in cases of high emotion, urgency and complexity through presenting survey respondents with three hypothetical scenarios:

High emotion: notifying a company that an incorrect item has been sent to them. This was chosen as a high emotion interaction as being sent an incorrect item is often frustrating, as not only has the desired product not arrived, but the customer is then left with the problem and effort of returning the item. This is not a particularly complex interaction, and in many cases will not be particularly urgent.

High urgency: checking the arrival time of a flight that the customer is meeting. This is likely to be an urgent interaction as it is very time sensitive. Complexity is very low - as the required information is simply a time - and in the majority of cases, should have a fairly low emotional impact.

High complexity: receiving guidance on completing a mortgage application or tax form. This is likely to be a complex and long interaction but is unlikely to have high levels of urgency or emotional response.

High emotion. The most popular option is to email the organisation, with 32% of respondents choosing this method. The second most popular, at 24%, was phoning the contact centre, and web chat also made a strong appearance, with 16% respondents choosing this as their preference. There was a strong pattern based on the age of the survey respondent and their preferred channel:

- The older demographics were the most likely to pick up the phone or to email.
- Web chat was a very popular option with the younger demographics and has actually overtaken the telephony channel for the 16–24-year-old cohort.
- 13% of the sub-25-year-old age group would choose social media, which is a major finding for businesses serving these customers.

Since 2018, there has been a drop in the proportion of customers choosing the email channel, but there has not been the attendant increase in telephony that can be seen in other

interaction types, although there has been a rise in the preference for face-to-face interactions.

High urgency. The most popular channel is that of telephony (34%), with most age groups choosing this as their no.1 option. This is quite a change on pre-pandemic findings, which put web self-service as clearly the most popular channel of choice and may be a reflection of customers' greater requirement for the reassurance and confidence that the phone channel provides.

Email, social media and web chat were more likely to be preferred by younger demographics, but not exclusively by any means. The effects of the pandemic can be seen clearly: live telephony has replaced web self-service as the preferred channel for urgent interactions, despite the massive investments put in place by many businesses to achieve the opposite effect.

It is not possible to state with complete confidence why this should be, but it may be that many customers have experienced very poor levels of customer experience from some companies that struggled in the pandemic and afterwards, and that they have reverted to the channel that they associate with confidence, flexibility and resolution: telephony.

High complexity. For highly complex interactions, the most popular contact choice pre-pandemic had been making a physical visit to an office or branch, which was much more popular with the older demographic.

However, this option has dropped in popularity, probably due to the customers getting out of the habit of making unnecessary visits during the pandemic, particularly as the experience would likely to be different than what they are used to.

It might have been expected that the next most-personal channel would have grown in popularity as a result, and telephony has risen from 16% in 2018 to 36% in 2023. Web chat was also seen as an appropriate primary channel for complex interactions by a significant minority of 25–54-year-olds, whereas email is generally much less popular than it is for high emotion interactions, possibly due to the probable requirement for back-and-forth communication.

As with urgent requests, the preference for telephony jumped hugely during the pandemic and has remained high, probably for the same reasons. Web self-service has seen the greatest drop in preference, with customers preferring to be reassured by an actual person: this is borne out by the relatively low drop in face-to-face communication, as if this was simply a matter of not wanting to risk these situations for health purposes, then telephony would have replaced face-to-face.

It seems as though customers – possibly through their own unsatisfactory experiences – have formed an opinion that they simply want to be talked through their complex issue rather than try and fail to do so using self-service.

4.4.5 Use of messenger, and most popular channels

As requested during the undertaking of this study, the study has researched the use of messenger apps, and one-to-one social media communication as part of this study, using existing data sources.

Usage data refer to general usage of applications. As outlined, industry data does not support the hypothesis of a widescale demand for contact centre support through messenger apps. In contrast, EDCC survey data (see Section 5) suggests that there may be, among EDCC users, a potentially larger market for an EDCC messenger service,

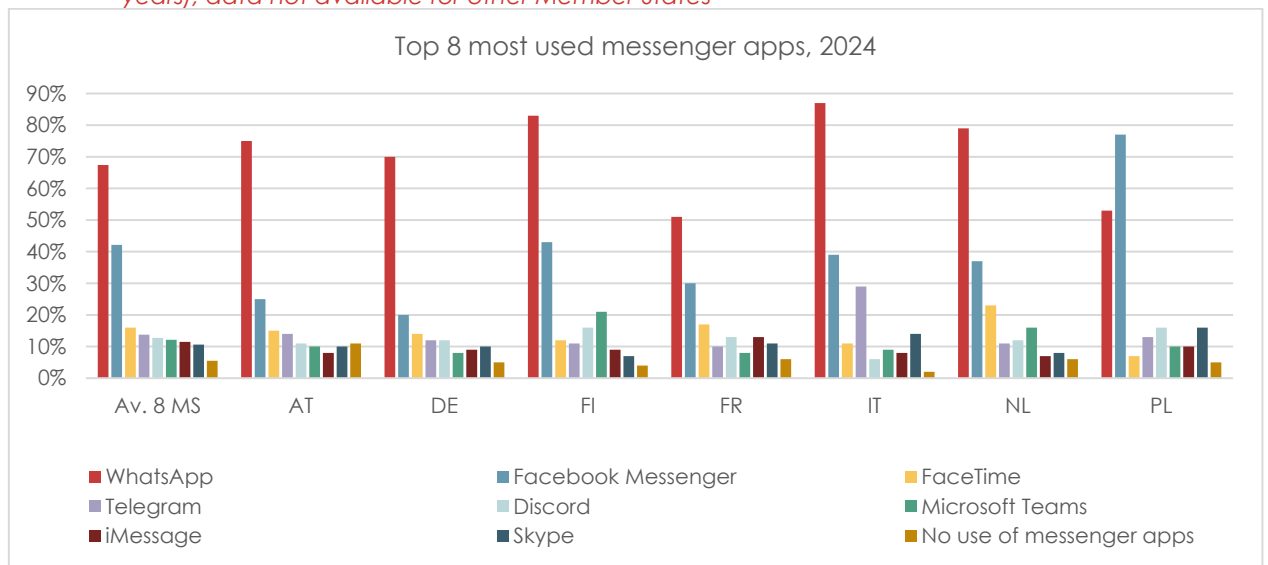
While a clear majority of EDCC users surveyed (81%) prefers traditional channels (phone and email), a significant 11% of respondents indicated a preference for messenger services should the respondent contact the EDCC again. This share is higher for past users who contacted the EDCC through Facebook messenger (40%) and lower for past users having contacted the EDCC by phone (5%). For users having contacted the EDCC by mail the share is 13%.

To research the use of messenger apps, two sources were used: 2024 data, covering a larger set of messenger apps (excluding social media channels) but a smaller set of Member States³³, and 2023 data covering all Member States, but covering social media channels and a limited number of applications. Existing data largely show same results.

WhatsApp is by far the most widely used messenger application. Data suggests that WhatsApp is used by more than 60% of the EU population. In terms of popularity. WhatsApp is followed by Facebook Messenger used by roughly two in five of the European population. Other popular messenger applications are Facetime, Telegram, Discord and Microsoft Teams. However, their use is considerably less widespread than WhatsApp and Facebook. More marginal, yet recurrently used messenger apps include Microsoft Teams, iMessage, Skype, Zoom and Google Chat.

There is some country variation, with Facebook Messenger being more popular in Poland and Sweden. In the latter case there is also extensive use of Facetime. The use of messenger apps is consistent across the population adult population, aged below 65. Across 8 countries, only 6% of the cohort aged 18 to 64 report not using messenger applications.

Figure 6 - Top 10 most popular messenger apps in 2024, in 7 Member States (regular use age group 18-64 years), data not available for other Member States



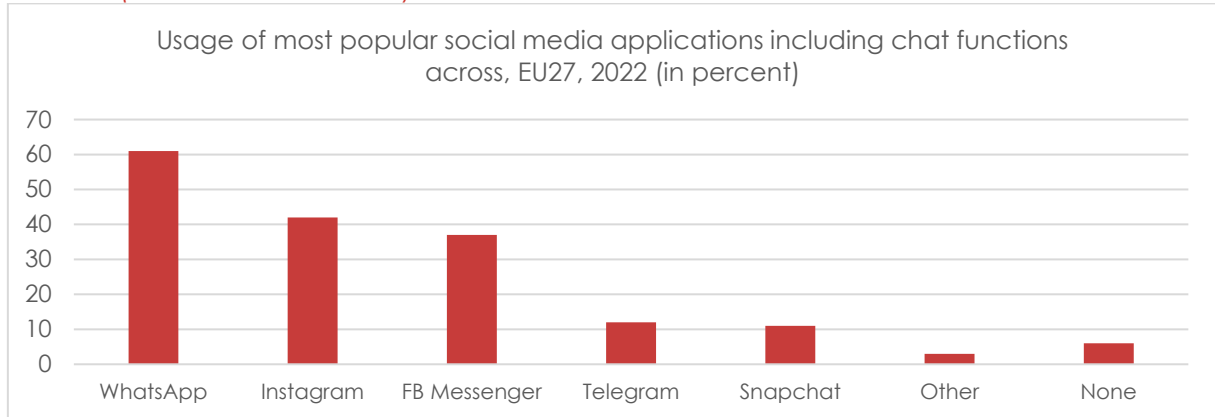
Source: Statista, Regular use among the age group 18-64, note snapchat not included.

Eurobarometer results are slightly different from Statista data but confirms the dominance of WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Overall, Eurobarometer data suggest lower usage of both WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger (61% vs 67% for WhatsApp and 37% vs 42% for Facebook Messenger). This variation is likely to be explained by difference in country coverage,

³³ Stemming from Statista, data available only for 7 Member States

but importantly also the population (with Eurobarometer covering all citizens above the age of 15).

Figure 7 - Usage of most popular social media applications including chat functions across EU-27, 2023 (use within the last week)



Source: Flash Eurobarometer News & Media Survey 2022

Eurobarometer data moreover show that there are some notable socio-demographic and country differences.

WhatsApp is the dominant channel in a clear majority of Member States. However, in six Member States (Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovenia), less than 20% of respondents use WhatsApp. Facebook usage likewise vary. In 24 of 27 Member States at least 30% of respondents say they have used Messenger in the last week. However, usage is much lower among Spanish and German respondents (15% and 17% respectively).

Overall, all socio-demographic groups use WhatsApp extensively. There is more variation as regards other channels. Those +25-39 are more likely to use Messenger. Those younger use less Messenger, and more Snapchat, Tik Tok, and Instagram. Those +55 are in general less likely to use chat apps. Overall, usage of social media and chat functions increased with length of education, with those in education, being the most likely to use dedicated chat apps – including Messenger. Further detail and country breakdowns are presented Appendix C.

4.5 Successful contact centres – business and consumer view

Interviewees were asked to provide insights into key aspects of a successful contact centre, and critical KPIs.

In today's contact centre landscape, the focus has shifted away from minimising costs (or outsourcing to low-cost countries). The primary goal is enhancing service quality. User satisfaction (or net promoter score, NPS), along with FCR, are seen as the most critical success indicators.

Organisations are prioritising the reduction of simple, repetitive requests by moving these interactions to self-service platforms and chatbots. This allows agents to dedicate more time to handling fewer but more complex and nuanced customer enquiries. The emphasis is on replacing simple transactions with efficient self-service options and providing better information to customers. These aspects are far more critical than channels used.

Live chat is on the rise, and several interviews indicate a desire to push clients towards this channel. Webchat is seen to be positively associated with high FCR and high client satisfaction.

Compared to email, it decreases the risk of misunderstandings (and hence lower the likelihood of multiple reiterations). It also enjoys higher satisfaction than mail. At the same chat is seen as more efficient than phone. Even using chatbots to triage and handle easy responses, gathering info and passing it to an agent where it can't help, has a noticeable effect on cost per chat³⁴. As such chat be seen as a more effective version of email and complex information can be linked to or emailed after the chat.

ContactBabel survey data has further collected data on factors that could be said to impact upon customer experience.

SIS contact centres placed first-contact resolution as their no.1 factor, with 83% of survey respondents placing this in the top three. Polite and friendly employees (52%), a short queue time (48%), a choice of channels (45%) and having the issue handled by one agent (43%) were also seen as important.

SIS operations do not differ hugely from the overall industry in their opinion of what makes a contact centre successful: first-contact resolution is the clear leader in both groups. Polite and friendly agents, and a short queue time are in second and third place although the order is changed for the industry as a whole.

Relatively few contact centres in either group believe that long opening hours, short call / chat times or having agents based in the same country as the caller impacts greatly on customer experience.

Customers – to an extent – agree with the businesses as to what a successful contact centre and customer experience look like: having the issue resolved first-time after a short wait time are the most important. However, customers state very clearly that having agents based in their own country matters to them: this is more a matter of audio clarity and mutual language and cultural understanding rather than anything specifically nationalistic.

4.6 Technology and AI

4.6.1 Use of AI & Knowledge Management

4.6.1.1.1 AI applications used

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a wide-ranging term for technology solutions which appears to emulate human cognitive capabilities through the 'understanding' of complex, natural language requirements, in order to reach its own conclusions and develop itself based on what works and what doesn't. Machine learning refers to the ability of software to evolve based on measuring its performance and success, without input from humans.

The key types of types of AI-enabled solutions currently used in the contact centre are:

- **Chatbots / voicebots:** conversational AI chatbots / voicebots use natural language processing – which includes speech to text transcription, allowing the voice channel to be automated – and have an understanding of the customer's context and intent. Machine learning allows them to improve responses over time
- **AI-enabled agent assistance** provides agents with tools that present important customer information, help agents identify likely upsell opportunities, guide them to important

³⁴ However, chat has a similar cost to phone (or even higher) where no automation / templating is used and when agents only work on a single enquiry at a time.

product information, provide AI-powered recommendations for agent review to improve customer interactions and automate after call work

- **QA monitoring & workforce management:** analysing call recordings and listening live to agents moves the contact centre away from making anecdote-based decisions, improving the reliability of the intelligence provided to decision-makers. By monitoring and scoring 100% of calls, the opportunity exists to connect analytics, quality assurance and performance management, collecting information right down to the individual agent level
- **Predictive customer analytics:** a branch of interaction analysis that looks at the nature and characteristics of past interactions, in order to identify indicators about the nature of a current interaction so as to make recommendations in real-time about how to handle the customer
- **Predictive call routing** AI enables an instantaneous gathering and assessment of data from multiple sources to occur even before the call has been routed, which allows accurate prioritisation and delivery of the call, helping agents by matching skills and requirements, and providing them with information before the call
- **Sentiment analysis:** by tracking customer sentiment in each interaction, customers expressing frustration or dissatisfaction can trigger an outbound contact to resolve the issue proactively, avoiding escalations that could result in inbound calls or complaints
- **Automated translation:** organisations providing multilingual services in some cases operate with AI automated translation through chat. This feature allows agents to respond to enquiries irrespective of language, driving up agent efficiency

4.6.1.1.2 Use of AI & machine learning in the contact centre

Among the centres consulted qualitatively, we found examples of all of the above forms of use. Recurrent reported use (or in development) evolves around Predictive Call Routing, sentiment analysis and AI-powered recommendations to improve customer interactions, quality assurance, conversations summaries, chatbots and automating simple queries.

However, it is also apparent, that use of AI is at different levels of maturity across the industry. ContactBabel's data suggest that smaller centres have lower use of AI technologies. Only 11% of SIS contact centres currently report using AI, although this is expected to rise to 41% by the end of 2027. Industry-wide, the current 23% penetration rate is expected to increase to 79% in the same timescale.

Overall, SIS operations tend to have lower use of most technologies, as they are smaller, have less budget and less requirement for efficiency-enhancing solutions. Of those few SIS survey respondents using AI, chatbots are the most common functionality (83%), with voicebots (67%) and AI-enabled agent assistance (65%) also in place in the majority. By the end of 2027, at least 90% these specific contact centres surveyed expect to be using these three solutions, and there is also interest in QA monitoring (60%) and predictive analytics (55%).

At an industry level, a similar pattern emerges, with greater interest in QA monitoring and predictive analytics than is seen in SIS operations, possibly as the amount of data to be analysed is less in these sort of contact centres.

4.6.1.1.3 Business views on AI in the contact centre

Interestingly, there is little difference in opinion within the contact centre industry in terms of how they view the likely impact of AI on the contact centre. The general opinion is that AI is less likely to replace agents; that it will certainly be used to help agents; and that it will be critical for almost every contact centre.

Across data sources there is strongly disagreement with the suggestion that AI would be irrelevant to the contact centre, with almost unanimous agreement that AI will affect contact centres of all sizes.

It is worth noting that after a growing feeling five years ago that AI will replace agents, recent years' views are very much of the opinion that they will not. It is also worth noting, that we found little evidence from the contact centres consulted that AI is being used without human intervention to address individual enquiries beyond the use of chatbots. Among the organisations interviewed, only a single contact centre indicated that they used AI this way.

4.6.1.1.4 Views on customer attitudes to AI

According to ContactBabel's data there is little difference between SIS operations and the contact centre industry as a whole on customers' likely attitudes to AI.

There was a strong belief that customers would not have a problem with AI if it helped them to resolve their issue as quickly and easily as possible. The uptake in web self-service and automated digital service suggests that customers will accept non-human assistance if it is convenient for them.

It was also thought that AI should not be hidden from customers, and that businesses expect separate generations to view AI differently. Respondents disagree some extent about whether customers will always prefer human interactions: more believe that customers will always prefer human interactions, although some do feel differently about this.

4.6.1.1.5 Agent desktop access to knowledge sources and comments on knowledge bases

Within a call, the agent is likely to have to use multiple knowledge sources, which will also take longer and run the risk (especially for new agents) of missing vital information that is available but perhaps hidden away.

Applications such as case-based reasoning (which prompts the agent to ask specific questions, drilling down to find the right answer) and AI-enabled virtual assistants are very useful in this regard. However, accordingly to ContactBabel's data, only 23% of all agents have access to case-based reasoning (11% for SIS) and 18% (7%) have access to an AI-enabled virtual assistant.

Most agents (95%+ for both groups) have to search around on a company website or FAQ page (45% SIS / 68% industry-wide), or rely on a wide, unsupported search of knowledge bases (23% / 42%) or the wider Internet (95%+), hoping to be fortunate.

This trend is less evident in the qualitative data, as many of these contact centres are more advanced in their use of AI and can be seen as being leading-edge.

The authors were asked to comment on how knowledge bases are typically created and maintained.

For many organisations, a knowledge base started off as a list of useful documents and files, which quickly grew into a wider, less coherent collection of information sources, requiring increased levels of expert management, amendments, editing, and deletion.

On an ongoing basis, feedback from agents and customers will identify gaps in the knowledge base which will need to be filled by product experts. Some knowledge bases will require full-time, dedicated resource to manage them, whereas others will rely on automated systems making dynamic changes depending on callers' and agents' requirements.

Many businesses start building their knowledge base by focusing on the knowledge required to meet the highest-value use cases, which have a large volume of interactions, a small

number of possible responses and very clear searchable tags. This does require dedicated staff and a clear delivery plan.

It is often the case that large businesses with many products and services to maintain will have numerous editors across many departments who can make suggestions, although it may only be a small handful of people who will verify and publish this information. Businesses may want to consider allowing certain contact centre agents to create new entries based on their communications with the customer. Understanding which documents are being used the most allows the maintenance efforts to be focused on the most important areas.

Depending on its sophistication, the creation, uptake and maintenance of a knowledge base may require a dedicated team, at least in its initial phase, of a user experience designer, data scientist and developer to build the model, with inputs from business experts to keep the model aligned with what the commercial requirements actually are.

5 Findings of Strand 3: Quality and usefulness of EDCC replies

This section of the report addresses Strand 3 of the study: quality and usefulness of EDCC replies.

The section provide insight into the perceived usefulness of the replies given by the EDCC, the quality of the services from a user perspective, and high-level insight into the steps taken by users, which follow from the replies given. The section further considers and preferred channels of contact going forward.

The section addresses the following evaluation question:

- Is the quality of the replies currently given by the EDCC satisfactory seen from the citizens perspective and how could they be improved?

The main findings of the section are as follows.

User satisfaction

In general, people who have contacted the EDCC have found the service helpful. Across the channels, the EDCC generates a good satisfaction score. Satisfaction is highest for phone enquiries and lowest for email enquiries. This finding reflects industry trends, where phone calls are associated with higher satisfaction, email with lower.

The EDCC service performs relatively better on form and speed of reply, and less well on the quality of reply. When users are dissatisfied, lack of perceived relevance of the reply is the main reason.

Satisfaction with the information provided is higher when questions relate to the EDCC's core activities covering EU information, grants or rights as an EU citizen. It is lower when the enquiry expresses an opinion, when the request relates to a specific document or a complaint or when the enquiry relates to a technical matter. Satisfaction is also higher for top EDCC themes (migration and home affairs, educational and cultural policy and employment and social policy). It is lower on topics such as transport, Internal market, customs and taxation, financial markets and out of scope questions. Overall, satisfaction with content provided is markedly lower among email users, than other users.

For the vast majority of EDCC users, contact to the EDCC is a step on the way, towards other activities or research. At least 70% of the respondents, across channels, consider further research, intent to contact other actors or the EDCC again, or undertake other steps. Data, however, also demonstrate that satisfied users are more inclined to think that other steps are unnecessary.

Overall, greater tailoring of written replies appear to have the largest potential to improve client satisfaction. There is some interest in chat and messenger functions. However, the large majority of users consult the EDCC via phone or mail. Should these users contact the EDCC again, they are generally inclined to continue using such channels.

Measuring user satisfaction going forward

The EDCC reports on overall user satisfaction providing aggregate results across all channels. This aggregate forms part of the EDCC's KPIs. The overall satisfaction rate forms part of the bonus malus scheme used to calculate payment.

While the overall high level of satisfaction is underlined, it must be noted, that the current satisfaction KPI provides a distorted picture of overall satisfaction. Reported average satisfaction was in 2023 91.2%. For phone replies to a rate of +90% is found, across the four

indicators (form of reply, timeliness, quality, and NPS). In contrast, for mail and chat, a +90% satisfaction score is not met for any of the indicators.

The variety in survey response rate across channels – and higher response numbers for phone – primarily explain this result. However, the calculation method of the satisfaction rate also impacts this result. There is a 20% share of the surveyed email users who were not satisfied with the information provided and who would not recommend the email service, who nevertheless are still mapped as satisfied in the contractor's satisfaction analysis. In view of these results it is recommended that the calculation model is reviewed, using the Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT) calculation model. Depending on what is valued, a composite indicator (using the four user satisfaction questions), or selected questions could be included. An alternative would involve the use of an NPS score.

Accepting the markedly different response rates across channels, but also the variation in user satisfaction there would further be benefit in considering if and how reporting could be improved. There would also be benefit in considering the extent to which the user satisfaction KPI should be measured by channel, or alternatively be reweighted by channel, so as to provide a more accurate satisfaction measure.

Finally, there would be benefits in considering how the survey is included in mails to users. User feedback to phone is high, but response rates for mail users is low, and lower than industry standards.

5.1 Background and response

The EDCC regular monitor user satisfaction using a standardised questionnaire which is sent to all users. To address questions of quality and usefulness two separate research steps were undertaken. First, analysis of the already existing user satisfaction data was undertaken, drawing on data collected from January 2023 to May 2024 included. Second an expanded user satisfaction survey was undertaken from the 7th of July until 31st of August 2024.

This expanded survey builds on the standard questions included in the EDCC user satisfaction survey. Additionally, this survey includes questions about whether respondents received all the necessary information, what their intent is for next steps following the information they received from the EDCC, what mode of response they would prefer to use to contact the EDCC in the future, how they heard about the EDCC, and what they liked and disliked about the Europe Direct service. The survey was operated in the nine most used languages of the EDCC (EN, FR, DE, IT, ES, PL, PT, NL and RO).

The standard EDCC survey collected 13,053 completed answers in the January 2023 to May 2024 period. The data from this expanded user survey contains 1,423 responses.³⁵

The response rates vary by channel and by survey. Total response rates are close to identical for the two surveys (5.4% for the standard, vs. 5.2% for the expanded user survey).

Both surveys perform strongly on phone enquiries, but response rates are low for the main channel, the email/webform. The expanded survey, however, perform better for mails (response rate of 2.4% vs. 1.4% for the standard survey).

³⁵ For completed in the case of chat and mail means full completion. All respondents who responded to the first chat and mail question completed the survey. There was drop out in the phone survey. For comparability we competition in the phone survey means at least four questions were answered. In practice, 864 replied to 4 questions, 679 replied to 6 questions. The final question of the survey only received 615 responses from those who contacted the EDCC via phone, with a 10.2 % completion rate

For the reporting the EDCC use a calculated aggregate to measure user satisfaction. In this section, data has been disaggregated, to consider the quality of reply across different dimensions. Breakdown by channel is provided to understand how participant experience the service based on their contact mode of choice.

Figure 8 - Representativeness of survey results

	Total questions Jan-23 to May 2024*	Completed survey replies to Jan-23 to May 2024	Response rate standard survey	Questions Jan-23 to May 2024**	Completed*** replies: expanded survey (July-Aug 24)	Response rate expanded survey
Email	169,820	2388	1.4%	19541	464	2.4%
Call	60,692	9167	15.1%	6037	864	14.3%
Chat	11,988	1498	12.5%	1722	95	5.5%
Sum	242,500	13,053	5.4%	27,300	1,423	5.2%

Source: EDCC reporting data. *Estimate for 2024, counting incoming enquiries**Counts only replies in the languages in which the survey was conducted, total replies in the period were 30888. Total replies in the languages of the survey were 27300. This represents 88% of all questions in the period. *** All respondents to chat and mail question completed the survey. There was drop out in the phone survey. For comparability we competition in the phone survey means at least four questions were answered. 864 replied to 4 questions, The final question of the phone survey only received 615 responses with a 10.2% completion rates.

5.2 User satisfaction

Four questions (included in both surveys) measure participants' satisfaction with the service the EDCC provided, including the helpfulness, quality, and timeliness of the service, their satisfaction with the information provided, and their likelihood of recommending the EDCC to other citizens.

In general, people who have contacted the EDCC have found the service helpful. The data show similar results between the two versions of the survey, with slightly higher rates of overall satisfaction with the service provided by the EDCC in the latest version of the survey (compared to the results covering the January 2023-May 2024 iteration). Overall satisfaction is highest for phone enquiries and lowest for email enquiries. This finding reflects industry trends, where phone calls are associated with higher satisfaction, email with lower.

Among the four indicators covered by the EDCC user survey (form of reply/agents' helpfulness, timeliness, quality, and likeliness to recommend), the EDCC performs relatively better on form and speed of reply, and less well on the quality of reply. There are marked differences, however, with phone outperforming other channels. Lowest levels of satisfaction are related to email replies, and specifically, "the quality of the reply". While a majority of email users are satisfied with the information provided, a significant 37% of email users indicated dissatisfaction with the quality of reply in the standard user survey covering the January 2023 – May 2024. The share is lower in the expanded user survey but remain significant (29%).

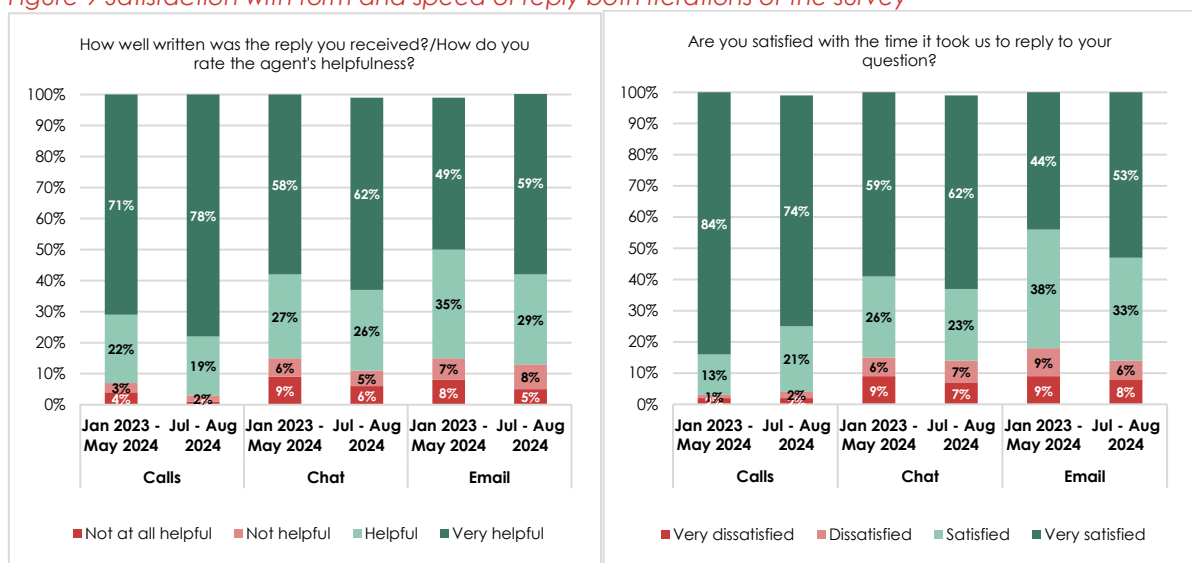
Lack of perceived relevance of the reply, is what drives dissatisfaction. The most recurrent criticism of the EDCC replies is that of low relevance. Several users noted that responses seemed generic not adequately addressing the specific questions raised.

5.2.1 Form and timeliness

The EDCC score particularly well, across channels, on the form of the reply – how it was written or how the agent interacted with the user. At least 85% of users were satisfied with this aspect of service delivery. Overall, users calling in are more satisfied, reaching an aggregate of +92% in satisfaction, and a high score of “very satisfied”. Satisfaction is somewhat lower across chat and mail services but reaches a satisfaction rate of >85% over time.

The EDCC likewise score well on timeliness. Satisfaction with the time to reply is particularly high for phone, reflecting the high standards for pick up time. +92% of callers are satisfied with this aspect of the service, with most being very satisfied. The share of very satisfied users is lower for email and chat. However, the vast majority (85% for chat and 82-86% for email) are satisfied, suggested that the current timelines for response in general is meeting user needs.

Figure 9 Satisfaction with form and speed of reply both iterations of the survey



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data

5.2.2 Content of the reply and likelihood to recommend

Overall, users are satisfied with the content of the reply and are inclined to recommend the service.

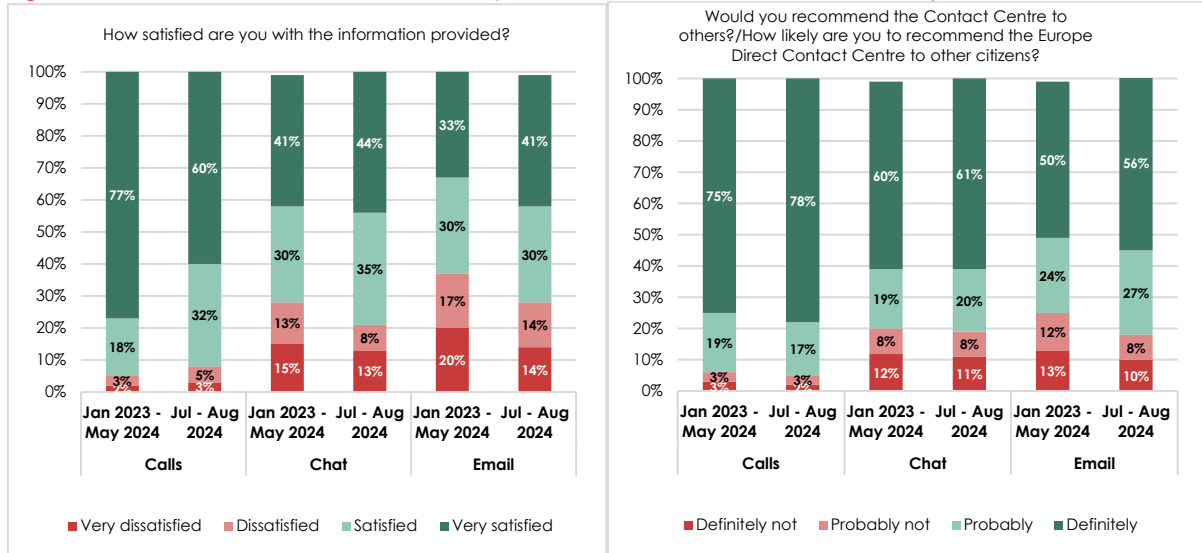
There are, however, differences between channels. Users calling the EDCC are considerably more likely to be satisfied with the information provided and are more likely to recommend the service. In the expanded user survey 92% of those who contacted the EDCC by phone felt satisfied with the information with which they were provided. 95% would recommend the service. 83% indicated that they had all the necessary information.

Email users are generally less satisfied. Seventy-one per cent of recent email users felt satisfied with the information they were given – 29% expressed dissatisfaction. Among surveyed emails users in the January 2023-May 2024 period, 63% expressed satisfaction with the information provided – 37% dissatisfaction. Reflecting the lower satisfaction with the information, Email users are also less inclined to think that they have received all the necessary information (62% agreed – 38% disagreed).

The EDCC messenger service performs better than email. 79% of the messenger users said in the expanded user survey that they were satisfied with the information (up from 71% in the in the January 2023-May 2024 survey).

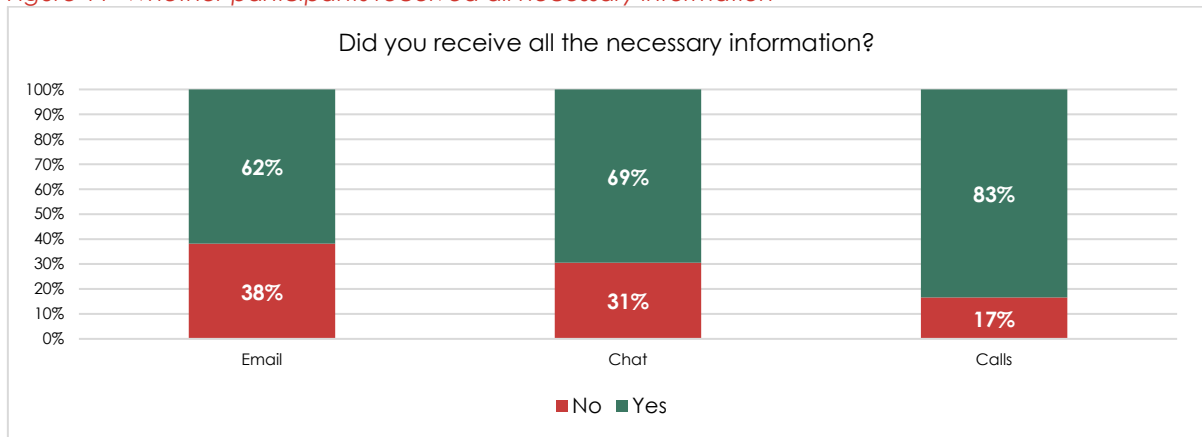
Reflecting the somewhat lower satisfaction with the information provided, email and chat users are also less inclined than phone users to recommend the service. Just about 8 in 10 would probably or definitely recommend the EDCC. However, the share who would definitely recommend range some 15 to 20 percent points lower than it is the case for phone users.

Figure 10 Satisfaction with the information provided - both iterations of the survey



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data

Figure 11 -Whether participants received all necessary information



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

5.2.3 What drives dissatisfaction?

A lack of perceived relevance of the reply, is what drives dissatisfaction. While some respondents' express dissatisfaction with form or speed, it is generally in a context where users are also dissatisfied with the content of the reply. Similarly, there is a close relationship between the propensity to recommend the service, and the perception of the quality of reply.

The most recurrent criticism of the EDCC replies is that of low relevance. Many of the unsatisfied users note in the expanded user survey that responses seemed generic, not adequately addressing the specific questions raised. In the open-ended survey responses there is a call for more direct and substantial answers rather than indirect, generic or even irrelevant information.

Several unsatisfied users explicitly stated that they had not received a reply to the question submitted to the EDCC. A common theme was the perception that the service lacks the capacity to handle complex or nuanced queries, leading to dissatisfaction.

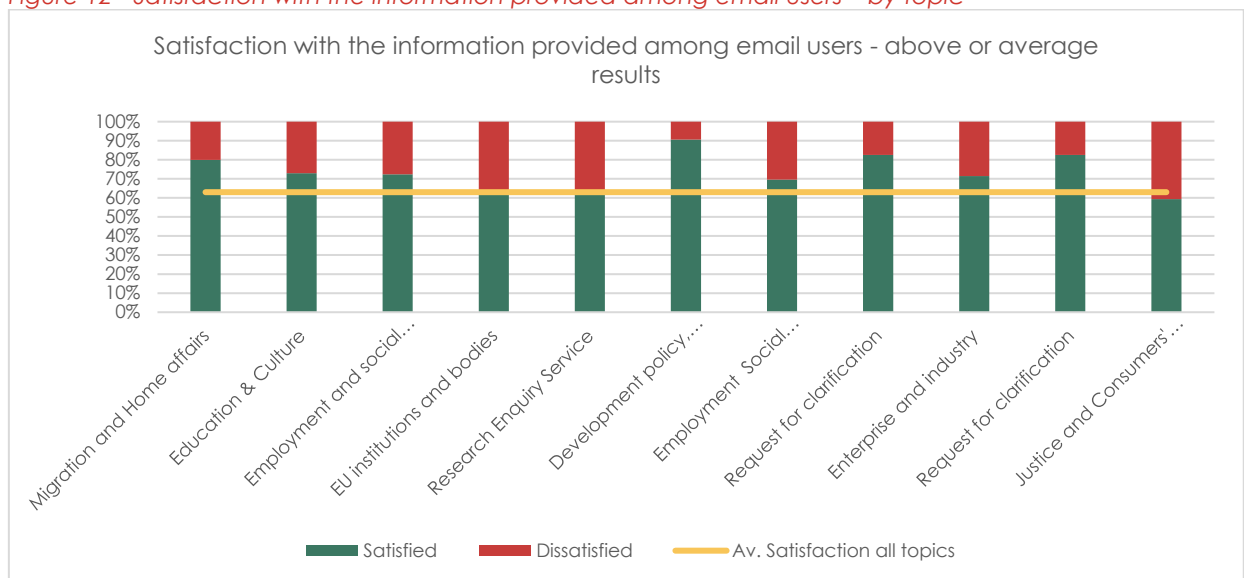
5.2.3.1.1 In what topical areas are people least satisfied with the information provided?

Judging from the survey results, there is some variation in satisfaction across the topics covered. In general, variation is smaller in the survey replies which results from the phone enquiries, and higher in the responses which relate to email enquiries.

Accepting that dissatisfaction is driven by the quality in response, and that dissatisfaction is mostly associated with email replies, we have considered dissatisfaction specifically for email, using the largest data set available (survey data from January 2023-May 2023). Only topics where at least 20 replies have been provided, has been considered.

Overall we find that satisfaction with the information provided is about or higher than average in five of the top seven topics of the EDCC – including Migration and Home affairs, Educational and Cultural policy and Employment and Social policy, and the Research Enquiry Service. In the case of Justice and Consumers' rights, satisfaction is below average, but not substantially below (59%).

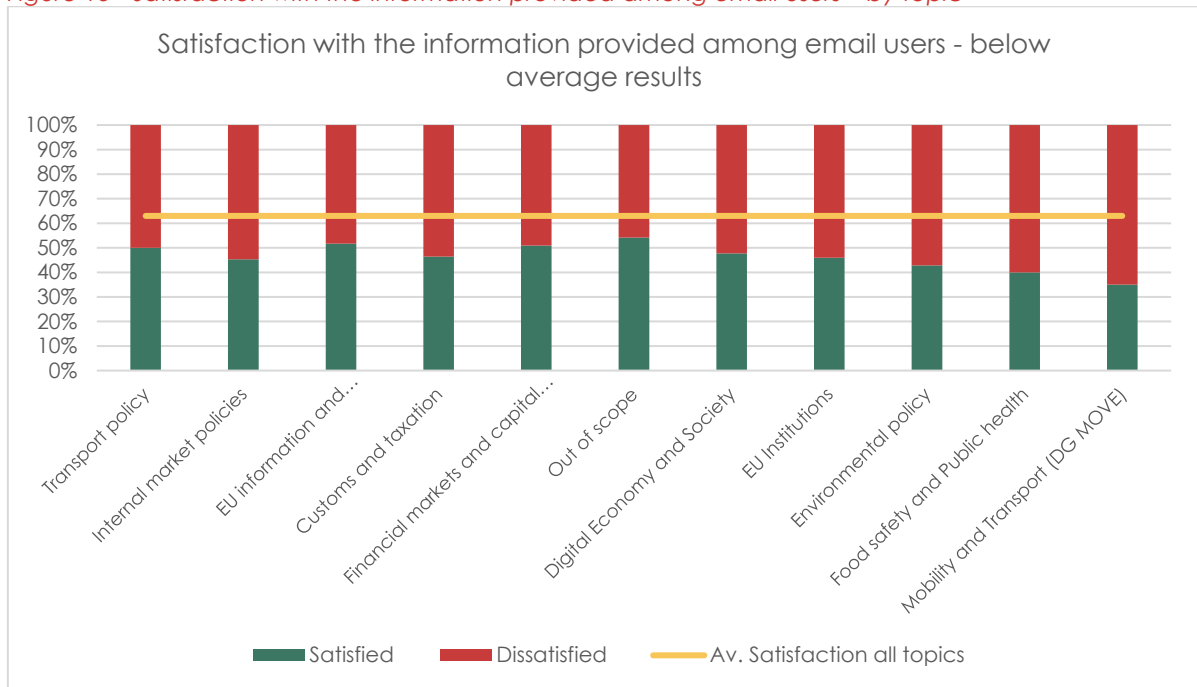
Figure 12 - Satisfaction with the information provided among email users – by topic



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering January 2023 – May 2024

Lower than average satisfaction with the information provided is found across topics such as Transport policy, Internal market policies, EU information and communication policy, customs and taxation, financial markets and capital movements and out of scope questions. Several of these topics feature in the main categories of topics covered by EDCC questions, but only transport features in the top 7.

Figure 13 - Satisfaction with the information provided among email users – by topic



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering January 2023 – May 2024,

5.2.3.1.2 Does satisfaction vary by type of question?

Overall data suggest that satisfaction with the services provided – and in particular the quality of the reply – somewhat vary by type of question. This data is only available for the July-August 2024 survey.

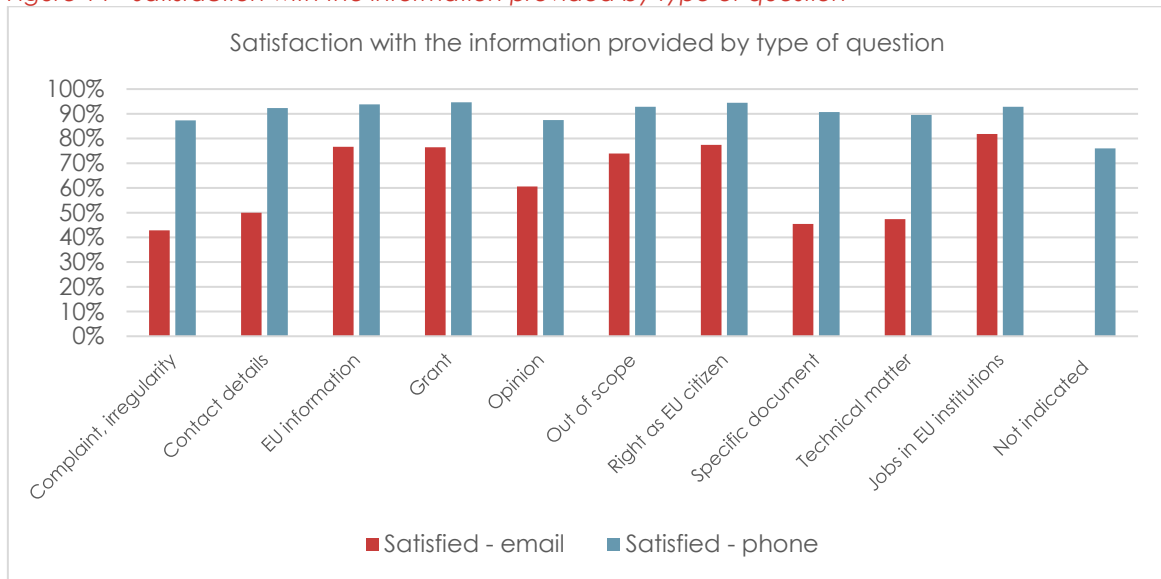
From this data it can be inferred that satisfaction with the information provided is higher when the questions relate to EU information, grants or rights as an EU citizen. Satisfaction with the information provided is lower when the enquiry is a complaint / suspected irregularity, when the enquiry expresses an opinion, or when the enquiry relates to a technical matter.³⁶

Reflecting the general results presented above, satisfaction by type of question is always higher for phone enquiries. Only in the category “unspecified” category³⁷ do we find higher levels of dissatisfaction among phone replies.

³⁶ The analysis did not account for types where few replies (<20) were provided. these are: Journalists, Non EDCC language, SOLVIT, and Study work, interview

³⁷ The nature of the enquiries is unknown. The enquiry data received only map these questions as “non-EU”

Figure 14 - Satisfaction with the information provided by type of question



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

5.3 What do users expect to do following their contact with the EDCC?

For the vast majority of EDCC users, contact with the EDCC is a step on the way, towards other activities, or research. At least 70% of the respondents, across channels, consider further research, intent to contact other actors (or the EDCC), again or, or undertake other steps.

Phone users are most likely to report that no further action is needed to answer their question (28%). They are also the least likely to contact the EDCC again, suggesting a higher first-time resolution rate than for other channels.

Figure 15 - Future intent after contacting the EDCC



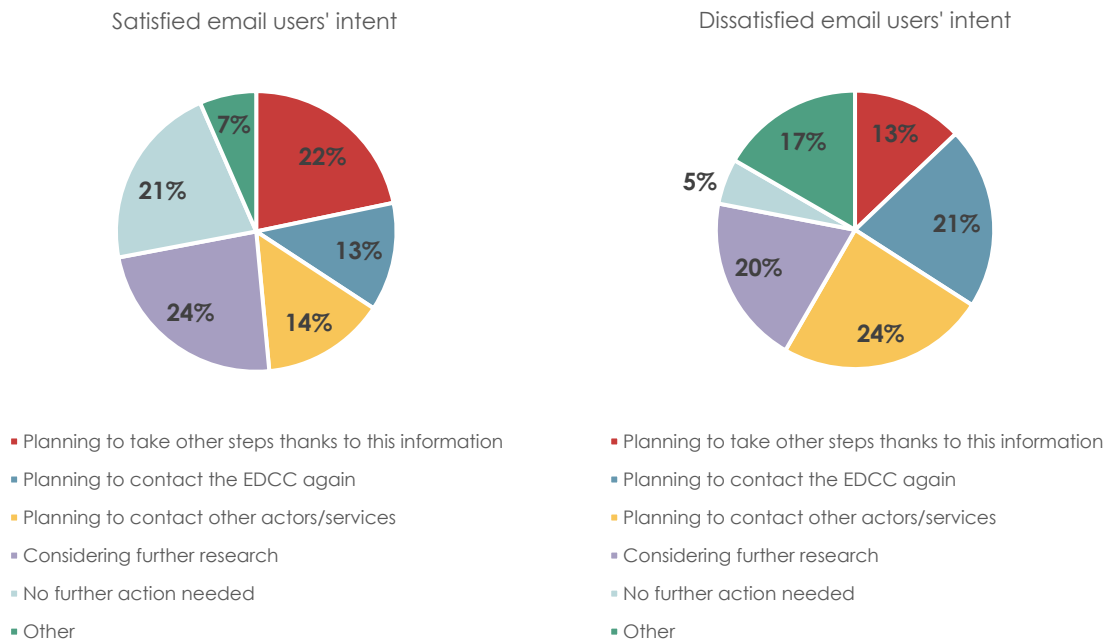
Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

Email users are the most likely to plan to contact the EDCC again (15%). However, across channels, users are more likely to contact other actors. About 1 in 5 of the survey respondents' intend to contact other actors – with higher shares for the chat and the phone enquiries.

Data however also show that intents to take other steps vary depending on the perceived quality of the information provided.

Figure 16 demonstrates that 21% of satisfied email users felt there was no further action that needed to be taken after contacting the EDCC, while only 5% of dissatisfied users felt the same way. Around a quarter of both satisfied and dissatisfied email users are inclined to consider conducting further research after contacting the EDCC, and about a fifth of dissatisfied email users are planning to contact the EDCC again, despite being dissatisfied with their first experience. 24% are instead planning to contact other actors or services.

Figure 16 -Email users' intent based on level of satisfaction



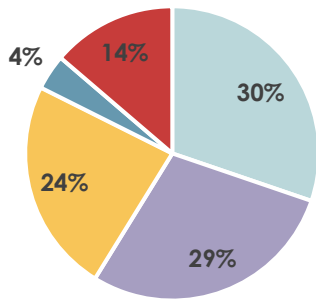
Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

The data for chat users' intent in relation to their satisfaction levels is similar to the data from email users, except for that 40% of dissatisfied chat users are planning to contact other actors or services after their experience with the EDCC, compared to only 24% of dissatisfied email users, who are more likely than dissatisfied chat users to consider further research or contact the EDCC again.

Overall, satisfied phone users are those less likely to take further steps, and those least likely to contact the EDCC again. However, a quarter still expect to contact other actors, and around the same share are planning other steps. Dissatisfied phone users are more likely than satisfied phone users to plan to reach out to the EDCC again (25 percent) and contact other actors or services (39 percent).

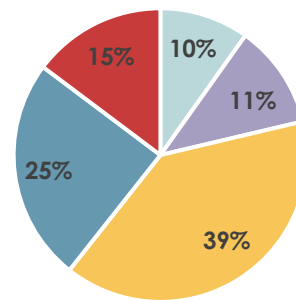
Figure 17 – Chat and phone users' intent based on level of satisfaction

Satisfied phone users' intent



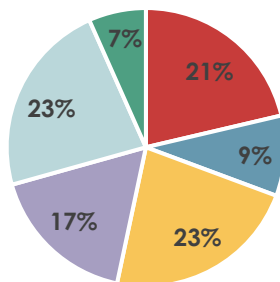
- No further action needed
- Considering further research
- Planning to contact other actors/services
- Planning to contact the EDCC again
- Planning other steps

Dissatisfied phone users' intent



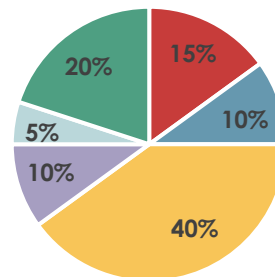
- No further action needed
- Considering further research
- Planning to contact other actors/services
- Planning to contact the EDCC again
- Planning other steps

Satisfied chat users' intent



- Planning to take other steps thanks to this information
- Planning to contact the EDCC again
- Planning to contact other actors/services
- Considering further research
- No further action needed
- Other

Dissatisfied chat users' intent



- Planning to take other steps thanks to this information
- Planning to contact the EDCC again
- Planning to contact other actors/services
- Considering further research
- No further action needed
- Other

Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

5.4 Preferred channels and awareness

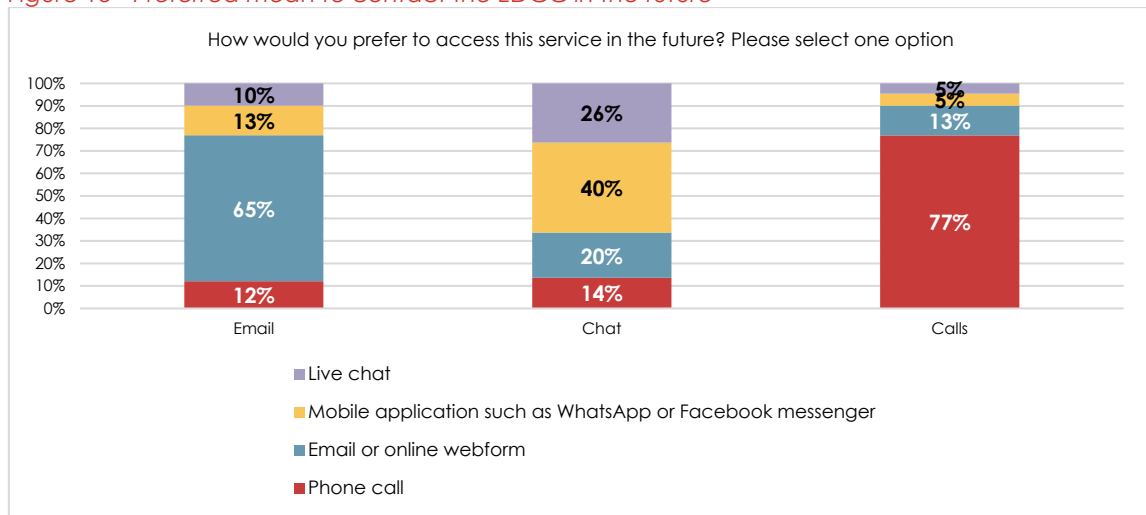
5.4.1 How would users prefer to contact the EDCC in the future

All users are inclined to stick to their current method of communication if they were to contact the EDCC service in the future. This trend is pronounced for phone users (77% would use the phone again), and for email users (65% would use email again). It is less pronounced for users

of the messaging service. While 40% of the users having used messenger would prefer a mobile application mobile application again – 60% would prefer direct chat, phone or mail.

The appetite for direct chat or messenger apps is not pronounced among phone or email users – although a significant 13% of email users indicate a preference for messenger apps and 10% would prefer chat. Shares are much lower for phone users, where email was the preferred alternative to phone.

Figure 18 - Preferred mean to contact the EDCC in the future

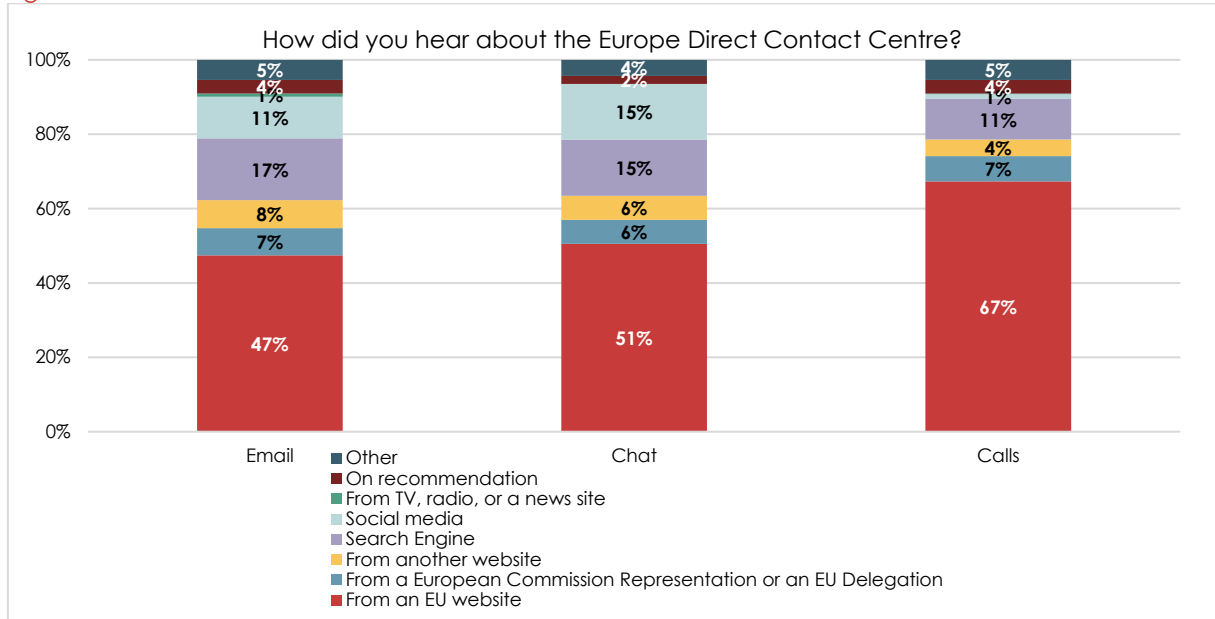


Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

5.4.2 Where have users gotten to know the EDCC

The majority of survey respondents heard about the EDCC from an EU website (58%), although phone users were more likely to have heard from this source (67%). The least common source through which participants heard about the EDCC was TV, radio, or a news site. Email and chat users are more likely to have heard about the EDCC through social media (11% for email users and 15% for chat users), compared to 1% of phone users.

Figure 19 - How users heard about the EDCC



Source: contractor's analysis of user survey data: survey covering July and August 2023

6 Findings of Strand 4: Pricing structure

The European Direct Contact Centre are coming towards the end of a 5-year contract with ESN & Conectys. The contract expires in September 2025.

The overarching objectives of the Commission's outsourced model for the EDCC are to ensure a quality service is provided to citizens contacting the EDCC service centres and that the service, organisation and contractual setup ensures efficiency and provides value for money for European taxpayers.

To feed the development of the forthcoming call for tender, and the new contractual setup, this section explores the current commercial model and the contract which underpin the delivery of the EDCC (outsourced services) in the light of industry best practice.

Among other, the section considers aspects relevant to inform the following question: What realistic pricing structure for the future Framework Contract for the EDCC would lead to maximum cost-benefit efficiency, based on evidence from the contact centre profession?

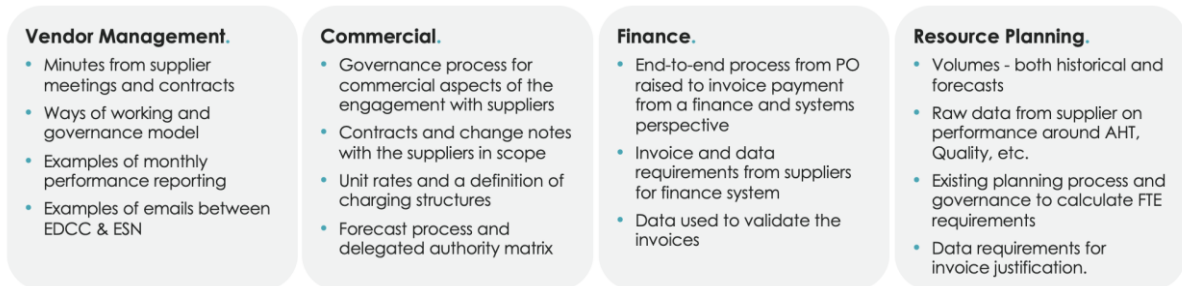
To meet these needs the following key activities have been undertaken:

- **Contract Health Check;** including a benchmarking of the EDCC contractual terms against industry best practice, what to change and suggested alternatives.
- **Invoicing Health Check;** including an End-to-End review and risk assessment of the process & invoice accuracy with recommendations on areas to improve

The assessment undertaken is build chiefly on desk review. EDCC contractors have not been approach approached. Central to the approach is that of comparison with industry best practice. To this end tkg has built on their extensive work with government agencies and global private sector firms supporting and developing their understanding of what good contracts & commercial models look like. This knowledge base has been used as the basis for industry best practice.

The following key data points have been used to inform documented in this report.

Figure 20 - Key data reviewed as part of Strand 4



The high-level findings from our assessment are outlined below. The next section goes into the detail of each observation and recommendation based on the two areas of investigation.

Key findings

Contract and commercial model The Commission, DG COMM has a 'relatively strong' contractual agreement with its provider. However, the commercial model is not driving the right behaviour with the provider.

Invoicing and costs The outputs from the Management Information System (MIS) imply the case volume is greater than the inbound channels. This suggests that the Commission is being

charged for work in progress & repeats. Put differently, there is a risk that DG COMM is being overcharged.

Costs given the level of enquiries, and range of languages, appear high. Equivalent charge rates look to be well above market averages, by approximately 25%, compared to operations in the EU of comparable complexity and range of languages.

KPIs The KPIs currently used spread the focus across too many measures. Each of the KPIs are important, but do not consider a set of primary and secondary measures. This means that the bonus / malus is diluted and does not drive the supplier to perform the service to its maximum potential.

Monitoring and control An operational audit is recommended to ensure compliance with the obligations of the contract and to ensure the MIS that is being delivered is aligned with the technical requirements.

Key recommendations

Drawing on the findings presented below, our top three recommendations are as follows:

- Undertake an audit of previously raised invoice data, MIS which is being produced, and operational staffing/productivity. An audit would have the following benefits listed below:
 - Having clear, insightful data on exactly what is happening today will be crucial for the RFP to ensure proper benchmarks against the legacy operation and enable greater understanding of the cost drivers affecting the operation
 - It could uncover overcharging which would not be using Citizens' taxes wisely
 - Staffing assessment would allow for a more competitive sourcing event and would likely also allow the Commission to obtain a discount from the supplier for the remainder of the term
- Review the Standard Operating Model of the current operation before the new sourcing event
 - Having a detailed operating model for how DG COMM wish to manage the outsourced provider is crucial. A Standard Operating Model (SOM) should be the basis for DG COMM's requirements in a new sourcing event. The basis for any future sourcing event is a detailed understanding of the "As Is" status and time invested to create the ideal To Be future state or Target Operating Model, that feeds into the RFP that goes out to the market.
 - A Standard Operating Model (SOM) would address many issues identified, by closing the gaps that have emerged between what people think the contract requires and what is actually happening
 - Lastly, a SOM is the definitive place where operating practices are defined and having stringer documented working practices now could improve the service quality and reduce cost through a different operational management model.
- Consider a more transparent contract and charging mechanism to ensure value for the Commission services and citizens
 - The perceived time for employees to become fully competent is significant, but investments in the knowledge base will have reduced this. This reduces switching costs and impact.

- A subcontracted BPO, Conectys, delivering the service via ESN, creates "margin stacking". In the future consider appointing a specialist BPO provider that meets the needs of the EDCC without needing another party to support them.
- The commercial model requires a significant refresh in line with the recommendations below. The future sourcing event should consider the findings of this report.
- The EDCC campaign is not large, but it is prestigious, so providers are likely to bid aggressively for the work, reducing the cost to service whilst protecting the citizen experience. Acknowledging that the service is likely to attract the attention of consultancy firms rather than specialist BPO providers, some effort should be taken to ensure a detailed market review is undertaken in advance, so potential suppliers are identified. Whilst the DG COMM cannot proactively approach parties, they could run an RFI or expression of interest to encourage a varied pool of possible providers are in the RFP process.

6.1 Contract Health Check

The team responsible for Strand 4 reviewed the contractual position from two perspectives:

- The Framework Contract: The main "front end" of the agreement that relates to the terms and conditions
- The Statement of Works: The Schedule to the Framework Agreement above outlines the contractual provisions relating to the services that are delivered

The approach included:

- A full review of all elements of the Commission's contract, including schedules and appendices
- Assessment of clauses against industry best practice from the customer's perspective
- Review of the charging structure, assessing the appropriateness of the charging mechanism against DG COMM's business objectives and breadth of control retained by the supplier

The main observations from this section are:

- Having three parties in the contract increases cost with each provider looking to make profit. Conectys' marking up' their costs before ESN add their profit expectation to the total cost and then the inflated cost is passed to the EDCC
- The KPI regime is overly complex, with the service penalty spread across too many measures, meaning they lose their impact as failure in one area barely dilutes the total invoice and can be recovered in an area of over achievement undermining the service credit regime
- The need to have university qualified Communication Officers is driving a higher underlying cost base
- The EDCC is paying separately for roles we would expect to see included in the fully loaded rate
- The payment terms are driving higher costs into the provider given the costs are largely people related costs

The key recommendations from these observations are:

- Ensure that the sourcing event for the new supplier is undertaken using a different KPI regime. A two-tier approach of primary and secondary KPIs is recommended allowing for a clearer focus on what is really important. the Commission's service ambitions need to be better reflected in the KPI regime with a maximum of 4 primary KPIs that attract bonus or

malus with a secondary set of 4 or 5 KPI that represent hygiene factors, elements that provide an entry point to the potential bonus

- Ensure that the new contract has a KPI regime that is more easily adjusted over time as performance changes, either through supplier performance or underlying changes to the process or systems. If a supplier overachieves a target for 3 consecutive months, their average performance should become the new baseline
- Create a new statement of work for the future sourcing event that provides greater obligations on the new supplier to drive innovation, improve performance and increase value for money

Elements to support these findings and recommendations are provided below, covering a review of the Framework Contract (FWC) which governs the delivery of the EDCC service and the Statement of Works (SOW). Each element reviewed under these sections is given a RAG status:

- **Green** – no issues
- **Amber** – concerns
- **Red** – issues

6.1.1 Framework Contract

6.1.1.1.1 Contract Term

FWC 1.1.3: A 60-month committed term is at the upper limit of market norms for contract duration. Typically, a 3-year term with an option to extend for an additional 2 years is preferred.

Set up costs are funded separately so there is no need for extended term to allow cost recovery.

RAG: Amber

6.1.1.1.2 Price Indexation

FWC 1.5.2: Indexation is currently based on standard indices, but it is applied to the entire price rather than just the labour component. Given that technology and property costs are expected to decrease over the contract term, indexation should only apply to 65% of the total cost, reflecting the proportion that is labour-related.

RAG: Amber

6.1.1.1.3 Payment Terms

FWC 1.6.2: A 60-day payment term may be considered excessive for a contract primarily based on people-related costs. The provider must absorb the cost of capital to accommodate the extended payment terms. A payment term closer to 30 days would be in line with standard practice.

RAG: Red

6.1.1.1.4 Termination

FWC 1.1: The termination provisions are balanced. The 6 months' notice for either party appears fair. However, the risk is on the Commission in the event the provider withdraws from delivering service. 6 months is not long. A more standard practice would be 3 months' notice for the Commission to serve notice and 9 months for the provider, allowing the Commission flexibility and proper time to run a sourcing event in the event the provider wishes to withdraw from delivering the service.

RAG: Amber

6.1.1.1.5 Invoice Factoring

FWC 11.21.5. Contract allows for invoices to be "factored". This means the provider can receive money from a 3rd party against the contracted commitment of the Commission to pay an

invoice. It allows providers with long payment terms to get paid faster. Providers, however, have to pay for the privilege of using a factoring service, usually 1 or 2% of the invoice value.

The Commission's extended payment terms could drive use of a factoring service and whilst allowed contractually, it drives up costs to the provider as they need the working capital to pay salaries each month.

RAG: Amber

6.1.1.1.6 Recovery of monies owed

FWC 11.23. Allows for the recovery of monies paid by the Commission which provides an opportunity for the recovery of money paid to the provider in error.

RAG: Green

6.1.1.1.7 Right to Audit

FWC 11.24 allows for an audit by European Audit Office, or a specialist appointed by the Commission services to undertake investitive work to ensure the contractual obligations are being met. This clause can be highly effective, but it is unclear if it is properly implemented.

RAG: Amber

6.1.1.1.8 Tone of Framework Agreement

The FWC is a multi-purpose document used across The Commission for the purchase of goods and services. Given the unique nature of Contact Centre Services, the Commission may wish to consider adapting more of the principles within the call off schedule to better reflect the services being procured and delivered.

RAG: Amber

6.1.2 Statement of Works (SOW)

6.1.2.1.1 Required Skills

SOW 2.2: The tender specification detail that Communication Officers are required to have a university degree. Supervisors are required to have a Masters in European Affairs.

This drives a significant level of cost into the provider and doesn't guarantee an outcome for the customer. Officers still require 3 weeks training. This is risk adverse and increases cost.

RAG: Red

6.1.2.1.2 Roles included in the Rate

SOW 2.2.1: Dedicated roles, notably the Project Manager and Deputy Project Manager, are built into the EDCC per minute pricing model. This add costs to the underlying per-minute price, even though these roles would not appear to be required on an ongoing basis and are rarely fully dedicated to the service.

RAG: Amber

6.1.2.1.3 KPIs

KPI spread

SOW 3.1: the EDCC contract operate with 11 KPIs for bonus / malus calculation.

11 KPIs spreads the focus across too many measures. Each of the KPIs are important but one would expect to see a set of primary and secondary measures which take into account those that attract bonus / malus and those which are hygiene measures. A 3% penalty would still leave the provider very profitable.

RAG: Red

KPI response time

SOW 3.1: KPIs require time binding. 80% of calls answered in 30 seconds needs a measurement period. The provider could answer 100% of call between the 1st and 28th of a month and then 0 on final day of the month and yet remain compliant.

RAG: Amber

KPI Data Transparency

SOW 3.1: The FWC oblige the contractor to provide full transparency. This is a great clause if it is ever used.

RAG: Green

6.1.2.1.4 Retention of recorded Calls

SOW 5.2.4: All calls are to be recorded. However, there is no reference to a retention policy. It is recommended to establish a clear retention policy to specify how long recordings will be stored and ensure compliance with data protection regulations.

RAG: Amber

6.1.2.1.5 Average Handle Time (AHT)

SOW 7.2: From the monitoring data attrition appears low with few communication officers leaving. However, there is no sign of a learning curve or performance improvement over time. Across the 2021-2023 period average AHT rises rather than falls.

RAG: Amber

6.1.2.1.6 "Mystery Shopping"

A mystery shopping webform populated on July 14th 2024³⁸ has not been answered within 12 weeks. Still no response to the case (21 September 2024)

RAG: Red

³⁸ Case Number: 4299026. 'Can my British parents benefit from medical care in Luxembourg if I hold citizenship and residency in Luxembourg'

7 Findings of Strand 5: Review of Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions

This section addresses the strand 5 of study: Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions (the Council and the European Parliament).

The purpose of the section is twofold. First, the section reviews the European Parliament's and the Council's enquiry services – considering key indicators (scale and complexity, organisation and performance). Second, the strand provides an analysis of collaboration between the entities (scale of collaboration and triggers for question transfer) and options to enhance collaboration. The latter aims to address the following evaluation question:

- How can the cooperation between the EDCC and the corresponding services in other main EU institutions be improved?

The main findings of the section may be resumed as follows.

Comparative review of the Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions

Similar to the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament offer enquiry services to the public and other interested parties. As a difference from the EDCC, enquiries sent to the Council and the European Parliament are dealt with internally and are managed by dedicated units within the institutions. The Council and in the European Parliament deal with a sizable number of enquiries annually, albeit numbers are much smaller than those of the EDCC.

Topics and issues of individual enquiries vary across the different services. Overall, it may be concluded that there is a level of overlap in the type of questions received by the three services – but also a significant share of questions, which are specific to the different institutions. A particularity of the Ask EP service is the existence of campaign messages.

The EDCC, the Council and the European Parliament all offer Q/A in all official EU languages. Compared with the Council and the European Parliament information services, the EDCC offers more channels, commits to shorter response time and has more advanced knowledge systems in place. However, the EDCC does not outperform the other services when considering actual time to response.

The Council and the European Parliament have, relative to the number of incoming enquiries, larger teams. Due to different setups and work responsibility, operations and staff efficiency are not directly comparable. Overall, however, it may be concluded that the EDCC is likely to be more efficient than the Council and the European Parliament.

Cooperation between the EDCC and the corresponding services in the Council and the European Parliament

The Europe Direct Contact Centre has structured processes in place for collaboration with the European Parliament, the Council and the European External Action Service, working through the EDCC enquiry management software. Enquiries are transferred between all institutions. Overall, the transfer rate is higher between the Council and the EDCC, and lower between the EDCC and the Ask EP services – in both directions.

Transfers from the EDCC to the Council and the Parliament's enquiry services are guided by escalation guidelines. Transfers from the Council or Parliament's enquiry services are not governed by guidelines, and there is variation in the approach taken to transfers. The Council transfer all enquiries which are not directly related to the Council. The Ask EP takes a different approach. Enquiries are transferred when they are addressed to Commissioners or the EC president or when they relate to interpretation of legislation requiring expertise from the Commission's officials. Other enquiries are addressed directly.

7.1 Review of Citizen's enquiry services of the main EU institutions

7.1.1 Scale and nature of the enquiries

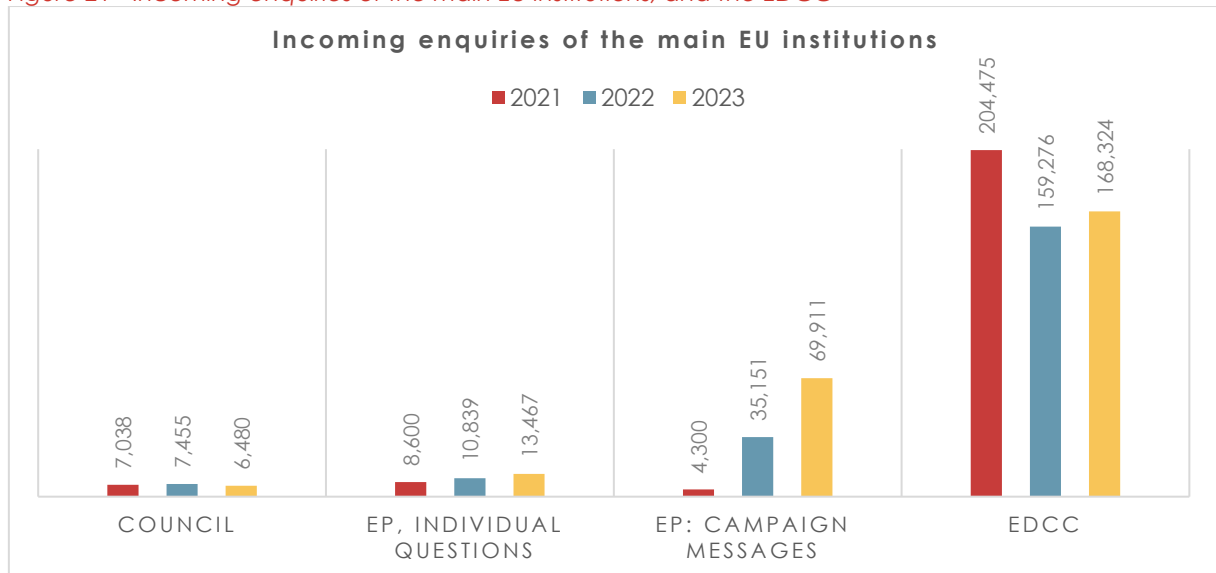
Similar to the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament offer enquiry services to the public and other interested parties. As a difference to the Commission's EDCC service, enquiries are dealt with internally and are managed by dedicated units within the institutions.

The enquiry services in the Council and in the European Parliament deal with a sizable number of enquiries annually. The Council's information services and the European Parliament Citizens' Enquiries Unit (Ask EP), however, deal with much fewer enquiries than the EDCC. In 2023, the Council received 6,480 information requests. Ask EP received 13,467 individual messages and 69,911 campaign messages in 2023.

Enquiry levels fluctuate over time. The number of incoming requests to the Council have overall remained stable over the last three years. The European Parliament have seen a steady increase in the number of individual enquiries (+25% annually).

European Parliament campaign messages vary more. These messages have increased very substantially over the last three years, from just above 4,000 in 2021 to nearly 70,000 in 2023. These campaign messages are composed of emails from citizens or other interested parties expressing their views on current issues and/or requesting action from the Parliament – forming part of a public campaigns. Mails may be identical, or similar in nature. In 2023, 56% of these messages (just above 39,000) related to the Driving Licence Directive. An additional 15% (or just above 10,000) related to The Regulation to Prevent and Combat Child Sexual Abuse (Child Sexual Abuse Regulation, or CSAR) and concerns about "chat control". As such they are not requests for information, but request for action by the European Parliament. These enquiries are subject to a standardised reply.

Figure 21 - Incoming enquiries of the main EU institutions, and the EDCC



Source: Public access to Council documents: 2021-2023 reports, Ask the European Parliament – You asked, we answered! 2021, 2022 and 2023. Annual report on questions answered by EDCC, 2023

Topics and issues of individual enquiries vary across enquiry services. The Council, the Ask EP and the EDCC services do not report topics the same way, which make comparison

challenging. However, the Council and the European Parliament receive questions which are similar in terms of topical coverage to those of the EDCC – but also a large number of institutional specific questions.

In terms of policy, migration, justice and home affairs are top topics for the EDCC, Ask EP and the Council in 2023. 23% of the Ask EP questions fell in the category “freedom, security and justice”. 14% of the EDCC questions relate to such topics.³⁹ For the Council the share is 9.1% in 2023.

Foreign policy is another recurrent topic. The top policy theme for the Council was in 2023 foreign affairs (17%) with the most frequent issue mentioned being the war in Ukraine. All other policy areas for the Council represented 25% of the enquiries. Foreign affairs is also a recurrent topic for the European Parliament (7% in 2023) – again with the main topic being the war in Ukraine. EDCC questions are organised by different categories – with foreign affairs reported to represent 2.7% of total questions. However, 6.9% of the ESS questions relate to Ukraine, Israel-Palestine and Brexit.

Other recurrent themes for the Ask EP service are environment, employment, social policy and transport. Each of these topics, however, weight <3% of total (or below 400 questions a year). The EDCC receive many more questions on such topics, and their weighting is more significant. The EDCC also receives many questions in areas of marginal importance for other services – such as educational and cultural policy, RTD and consumer protection.

Questions related to specific institutions, are more recurrent among the Council and the Ask EP questions than among the questions sent to the EDCC. Overall, 2,040 enquiries treated by the Ask EP (or 15% of total) related the European Parliament itself. These questions covered MEPs and their activities, traineeship, job opportunities, possibilities to visit the European Parliament, parliamentary questions, committee meetings and the right to petition. The share of institutional questions relating to the Council represented 14% of the questions received, or some 890 questions. 5.3% related to other EU institutions.

In the case of the EDCC only 6.4% of the 2023 enquiries relate to EU institutions and bodies (10,710 questions). 3.4%, or 5807 questions, related specifically to the Commission.

Finally, it may be observed that all services receive mails about personal situations of the enquirer covering topics such as funding opportunities, cross-border administrative issues and legal aid. All services also receive political opinions. Personal issues and comments, represent some 20% of all of the Council's information requests. For the EDCC questions related to citizens' rights represent 9.6% of 2023 question (second semester 2023⁴⁰). Grant related questions represent 8.9%. Opinions represent 5.6% of total.

The share of enquiries which are positions, rather than questions is not known for the Ask EP service, but it is understood that the share is significant – beyond the weighting seen for other services. The Ask EP service reportedly also deals many enquiries about citizens' personal situations with requests for assistance to help them solve problems (financial support, legal, cross-border issues, cases of discrimination, etc.). While the Ask EP state that it cannot resolve many of these types of requests directly, the service provide citizens with a contact point and sources of information whenever possible.

³⁹ Covering: The Schengen area, borders, visa, EU migration policy, Civil Justice, Free movement, Fundamental rights, Rule of law and EU citizenship

⁴⁰ This data is not collected for the first semester 2023

Overall, judging from the descriptive and qualitative data collected it may be concluded that there is a level of overlap in the type of questions received by the three services – but also a significant share of questions, which are specific to the different institutions. A particularly of the Ask EP service is the existence of campaign messages.

7.1.2 Service offering, and performance metrics

7.1.2.1.1 Access

The Council information service and the European Parliament Citizens' Enquiries Unit (Ask EP) provides Q/A services to any citizen or interested party in writing. These services are offered in all official EU languages. The Ask EP service also provides answers in Catalan, reflecting a number of questions from the Catalonia.

Information requests can be sent through webforms available on the sites of the Council⁴¹ and the European Parliament.⁴² Letters may also be sent to the services. They represent a smaller, yet significant share of all requests (7% of the Councils incoming requests, about 10% of the Ask EP requests). The European Parliament also operates an EP app, providing information and offering options to submit questions. The number of enquiries stemming from this channel, however, is marginal (1-2 a month).

The Council information service and the European Parliament do not offer telephone or chat options, citing capacity as the main reason. The relevant webpages of the Council and the European Parliament, refers to the EDCC for phone enquiries. The European Parliament page relative to questions refers to Solvit and the Your Europe portal.

Similar to the EDCC the webforms require personal information about the enquirer (name, country of residence) and in the case of the Council also gender. The EP template (as the EDCC webform) also request information about the preferred language of the enquiry and about a potential other language.

7.1.2.2 Multilingual services

Both the Council and the Ask EP information services provides question and answer services in all of the official EU languages. As for the EDCC, enquiries are in practice concentrated on selected languages. The Council estimate that roughly 75% of enquiries are submitted in the five most used languages (EN, FR, ES, IT DE). The Ask EP estimate that some 70% of all enquiries are submitted in these languages. These shares are similar to those of the EDCC (76% of 2023 enquiries in the five most used languages: EN, FR, ES, IT DE).

In the main, these services are ensured by the core teams who are capable of providing answer services in most used language. Thanks to its larger team, the Ask EP services also cover many of the other official languages, along with Catalan. Where languages are not mastered by the core team, alternate languages mentioned in the enquiry form may also be used (roughly 10% of the European Parliament enquiries are addressed in alternate languages). Translation services of the respective institutions may be called upon. The Council also uses automatic translations tools.

This compares to a fully multilingual service in the case of the EDCC.

⁴¹ [Write to us | Forms | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)

⁴² [Send a message - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

7.1.2.3 Knowledge base and coverage

Compared to the EDCC, the Council and the Ask EP service have simpler systems in place to manage knowledge and to address enquiries. The Citizens' Enquiries Unit operates with a set of model answers (including for hot topics), a knowledge wiki, access to past replies, and the use of standard fragments which can be used to develop replies. The Council in has a set of standardised templates which may be adjusted for replies.

The Council estimate that roughly 70% of the replies given can be based on the existing standard templates. 30% needs a tailored reply. The European Parliament was not able to provide a comparable estimate.

7.1.2.4 Targets and quality metrics

Reflecting the internalised structure of the Ask EP and the Council's information services (see below), and the overall smaller operation citizen's enquiry services of the Council and the European Parliament operate with fewer performance measures than that of the EDCC. Formal response times are in place. Time to response or backlogs are monitored. Quality is likewise monitored, directly or indirectly.

7.1.2.5 Response time

The Ask EP service and the Council have longer formal response times than the EDCC. However, average time for reply is close to or shorter than the EDCC response time for mails. For the Ask EP the formal response time is 14 calendar days, but average response time is 1.45 days. For the Council formal response time is a maximum of 15 working days. Average response time is estimated around 3 days. This compares to an average of 2.9 days for response to the EDCC written enquiries.

7.1.2.6 Quality control and satisfaction measurement

Quality is measured directly or indirectly by both the Council and the European Parliament services. The European Parliament monitors quality primarily through quality control. 3% of the replies provided per month are checked. The Ask EP service also promotes to the standard survey used across the European Parliament, to monitor quality. However, survey data is not used as a key performance indicator, The Council does not use surveys but monitor complaints, as a key metric for quality.

This compares to a more substantial system of quality measurement and control of the EDCC, involving internal and external quality control, and regular user satisfaction and measurement. However, as also outlined in Section 5, the EDCC's own user satisfaction measures are not without flaws.

7.2 Collaboration between the EDCC, the European Parliament, the Council and the European External Action Service

The Europe Direct Contact Centre has structured processes in place for collaboration with the European Parliament, the Council and the European External Action Service, working through the EDCC enquiry management software.

Collaboration systems and models vary. From a management perspective the EDCC treats the Ask EP, the Council and the European External Action Service as "back offices", to which enquiries are transferred. Guidelines for transfers are in place for each EU institution. The Council and the Ask EP has different practices in place for transfer of enquiries to the EDCC.

7.2.1 Collaboration agreements, transfer triggers and scale of collaboration

Collaboration with other EU institutions have different set ups and history. The European Parliament has an escalation agreement in place since 2011. For historical reasons there is no escalation agreement for the Council, but a set of escalation guidelines are in place.

Specifically, the EDCC is to escalate/transfer to the Council when:

- Messages are addressed to either the President of the European Council or the President of the Euro-group
- When messages relate to requests for corrections of legislative acts emanating from the Council
- When enquiries relate to Treaties and Agreements for which no information is publicly available
- When enquiries relate to requests for access to documents whether public or non-public documents (if the requested document is not found in the Council's register the enquiry should be escalated.
- When mails relate to the rotatory presidency

Enquiry escalation/transfer from the EDCC to the European Parliament is to take place when enquiries are:

- Related to petitions
- Addressed to the EP president, the Secretariat General and the Deputy Secretariat General
- Addressed to MEPs
- Covering the European Parliament (when the corresponding answer/information is not available on Europarl.eu)
- Covering document requests – when documents are not available on Europarl.eu
- Mails from representative groups, journalists and interest groups

8 Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 Answers to the study questions

8.1.1 *How can the operation of the EDCC be improved based on evidence from governmental contact centres, and the contact centre industry?*

Overall, EDCC metrics are superior to both private and public contact centres in operational performance, and key HR agent metrics. Email response time is slightly higher than comparative services, but EDCC user survey data does not provide an argument for shorter response times.

We conclude that there does not appear to be obvious opportunities for EDCC to improve the quality of its operational performance. Nor is there evidence to support tightening of targets set for the operational metrics monitored.

In contrast, there are opportunities to reduce the time spent on post-call work which accounts for 65% of the overall interaction time, and for decreasing the time spent per email and chat enquiry. There are also lessons to be learned as regards the use of the knowledge generated to improve information services.

8.1.2 *Which channels and context would citizen like to use to get factual information from the EU in the future?*

Phone remains the dominant channel for contact centres in both the public and private sectors. It is expected to stay the top choice for incoming enquiries in the foreseeable future. However, the contact centre industry as a whole has seen a movement away from telephony and towards digital channels, with improvement and development of self-service options seen as a priority among several public contact centres.

Phone is positively associated with high FTR and high user satisfaction. Email performs lower on both indicators. Web chat has the advantage over email of being a synchronous channel, with higher satisfaction and higher FTR. The use of webchat, however, is more widespread in the private sector than in the public sector. Use of social media channels to engage with citizens is not widespread in the private sector and is marginal in the public sector. Within the public sector, there are widespread concerns related to privacy and data protection.

Compared to the overall trends in the contact centre industry, EDCC shows a different pattern. The EDCC receive higher rates of mail (70%), lower rates of telephone (25%) and higher rates of messaging (5%). Email and phone are likely to remain the dominant channels for the EDCC in the foreseeable future. There, however, is some appetite for social media and chat among current EDCC users.

Considering the complexity of the EDCC enquiries, current user patterns, the current level of enquiries and preferred channels of current users, we conclude that there is no substantive argument for the development of further channels (incl. live chat). We further conclude that the development of messenger services, including existing ones, must be carefully evaluated in light of GDPR regulations and data protection requirements.

8.1.3 *How should the EDCC use Artificial Intelligence in knowledge management in the future, based on evidence from the contact centre profession in general?*

Accepting the high average time spend on enquiries, there are apparent opportunities to enhance efficiency in enquiry handling using AI. Specifically:

- AI-generated post-call notes and automated call classification could help reduce the time spent on post-call work, which accounts for 65% of the overall phone interaction time
- The use of AI natural language understanding to emails, automated information retrieval applied to the knowledge base, and AI powered suggestions for replies, which agents can then amend and send, should help decrease time spend on email enquiries. The systematic use of automated translation for drafting and reporting should further help decrease reporting time

AI can also be used to update knowledge bases on an ongoing and cumulatively beneficial basis, gathering information from customer surveys as to which responses have been most successful for citizens. The use of AI for quality control purposes is also generating traction.

It is the contractor's estimate that the effective implementation of such tools could drive down handling time beyond the estimates/targets set for efficiency gains under the current contract for implementation of AI features on the EDCC knowledge base.⁴³

8.1.4 *Is the quality of the replies currently given by the EDCC satisfactory seen from the citizens perspective and how could they be improved?*

Citizens who have contacted the EDCC have found the service helpful. Across the channels the EDCC generates a good satisfaction score. Satisfaction is highest for phone enquiries and lowest for email enquiries. This finding reflects industry trends, where phone calls are associated with higher satisfaction, email with lower.

Satisfaction with the information provided is higher when questions relate to the EDCC's core activities covering EU information, grants or rights as an EU citizen. It is lower when the enquiry expresses an opinion, when the request relates to a specific document or a complaint or when the enquiry relates to a technical matter. Satisfaction is also higher for top EDCC topics, and lower for many of less covered topics.

Overall, greater tailoring of written replies has the largest potential to improve client satisfaction. Improvement in this area, however, may involve greater costs, as it is likely to be associated with more interpretation of information.

8.1.5 *What realistic pricing structure for the future Framework Contract for the EDCC would lead to maximum cost-benefit efficiency, based on evidence from the contact centre profession?*

EDCC talk time / post-call activity is very different from other public and private contact centre operations – with much higher post-call activity and much longer time spend on email enquiries. Costs per interaction are significantly higher than those found in the public or private sector. Overall, when accounting for level of enquiries, and range of languages, costs appear high.

DG COMM has a 'relatively strong' contractual agreement with its provider. However, the commercial model is not driving the right behaviour with the provider.

The KPIs currently used spread the focus across too many measures. Each of the KPIs are important, but do not consider a set of primary and secondary measures. This means that the bonus / malus is diluted and does not drive the supplier to perform the service to its maximum potential.

⁴³ See section 1.

In view of these findings, we conclude that there is a need to review the Standard Operating Model of the EDCC before DG COMM launch a new tendering procedure. This new model should ensure a more transparent contract and charging mechanism to ensure value for the Commission services and citizens.

8.1.6 *How can the cooperation between the EDCC and the corresponding services in other main EU institutions be improved?*

The Council and the European Parliament offer enquiry services to the public. Their enquiries are dealt with internally.

There is a level of overlap in the type of questions received by the three services – but also a significant share of questions that are specific to the different institutions. The EDCC offers more channels, commits to shorter response time, and has more advanced knowledge systems in place. However, the EDCC does not outperform the other services when considering actual time to response. Transfers from the EDCC to the Council and the Parliament's enquiry services are guided by escalation guidelines. Transfers from the Council or Parliament's enquiry services are not governed by guidelines, and there is variation in the approach taken to transfers,

Generally, partner services consider that current collaboration works well. However, this does not translate into a desire for change towards closer collaboration, or a desire to work toward a single access point. There are several obstacles to closer collaboration – and in particular to a joint first stop shop. At an operational level however, enquiry transfers could likely be facilitated by greater levels of transparency and access to the questions and answers provided.

8.2 Recommendations

In view of the above conclusions we have organised our recommendations into priority recommendations, which would need to be considered before the DG COMM launch a new tendering procedure, and aspects which merit attention but are of secondary importance.

8.2.1 *Priorities going forward*

Drawing on the findings presented below, our top three recommendations are as follows:

A. Undertake an audit of previously raised invoice data, MIS which is being produced and operational staffing/productivity.

Having clear, insightful data on exactly what is happening today will be crucial for the RFP to ensure proper benchmarks against the legacy operation and enable greater understanding of the cost drivers affecting the operation.

Staffing assessment would potentially allow for a more competitive tendering procedure.

Additionally, an audit of invoicing data may uncover overcharging and may allow the Commission to obtain a discount from the supplier for the remainder of the term.

B. Review the Standard Operating Model of the current operation before going to tender

Having a detailed operating model for how DG COMM wish to manage the outsourced provider is crucial. A Standard Operating Model (SOM) should be the basis for DG COMM's requirements in a new call. The basis for any future sourcing event is a detailed understanding of the "As Is" status and time invested to create the ideal "To Be future state" or "Target Operating Model", that feeds into the RFP that goes out to the market.

A Standard Operating Model (SOM) would address many issues identified by closing the gaps that have emerged between what people think the contract requires and what is actually happening.

Lastly, a SOM is the definitive place where operating practices are defined and having stronger documented working practices now could improve the service quality and reduce cost through a different operational management model.

C. More transparent contract and charging mechanism to ensure value for the Commission services and citizens.

The new statement of work for the future call for tender should provide greater obligations on the new supplier to drive innovation, improve performance and increase value for money. The commercial model requires a refresh. The forthcoming statement of work should consider the findings presented in section 6 – including, but not limited to, KPIs and charging models.

KPI regime

A priority is to ensure that the future EDCC contract is based on a different KPI regime. A two-tier approach of primary and secondary KPIs is recommended allowing for a clearer focus on what is important.

The Commission's service ambitions need to be better reflected in the KPI regime with a maximum of 4 primary KPIs that attract bonus or malus with a secondary set of 4 or 5 KPIs that represent hygiene factors, elements that provide an entry point to the potential bonus.

DG COMM further needs to ensure that the new contract has a KPI regime that is more easily adjusted over time as performance changes, either through supplier performance or underlying changes to the process or systems.

In view hereof it would be beneficial for the new contract and commercial model for procuring services beyond February 2025 to be based on a mechanism where:

- KPIs are tiered in importance into primary and secondary measures.
- A Qualification Threshold exists where any one KPI being negative means the bonus is withheld. This creates a threshold or set of minimum standards the provider must meet before being eligible for reward
- A "ratchet mechanism" exists where multiple failures or over performance really drives performance. 10% Down / 5% Up
- Bonus should be payable on elements of the KPIs that have demonstrable value to The Commission. e.g. volume reduction or improvements in first contact resolution, meaning lower repeat contacts
- Over delivery of a KPI for 3 consecutive months should reset the new baseline to that level. For example, delivering an outcome 3% over target for 3 consecutive months should mean the target gets adjusted up by 3%. This is normal re-baselining practice in the private sector and ensure that through the life of the contract the KPI regime is fair to both sides. Similarly, an under performance of 3 months requires a discussion about what is achievable and whether the targets are set correctly given the operational constraints of process or system

We further recommend that DG COMM critically reflects on what really drives the service experience and what sits at the heart of its strategy for the outsourced operation. This will likely create a set from within the existing KPIs that are very important, and some that DG COMM would want to keep, but are not as crucial to the experience desired.

This new set of measures would replace the current format and be determined by DG COMM leadership team based on the strategy for the EDCC going forward.

We suggest the following as a starting point for the discussions on the current KPI regime.

- Make Primary: Calls answered in 30 Seconds
- Move to Secondary: Calls abandoned less than 5%
- Make Primary: First Level Response Rate 95% Target

- Make Primary: Average Response Time for emails 2 working days currently. Lower to 24 hours
- Move to Secondary. Second line handle time. 2 days. Lower to 1 day
- Remove: Returned Second Line Response Time
- Remove: Forecast Accuracy. You have a % answered which is sufficient to protect service level
- Move to Secondary: Quality of replies. 80% Covered by citizen satisfaction
- Make Primary Measure. Citizens Satisfaction >80%. Review methodology
- Remove: Job Satisfaction 80%
- Remove: Pertinence of the Knowledge Base 80%. This is hard to measure and other KPIs are impacted by a poor knowledge base, so the indicator in effect is duplication.

An alternative set of measures may include.

- Cost per contact, total budget divided by total contacts
- % of contacts that could have self-served

Reward structure

A new Reward Structure should replace service the current regime to properly incentivise performance. All the measurements should be defined in the contract Schedules, including calculations, systems, triggers for service credits and material breach as well as the time period over which performance is measured to prevent overdelivering at the end of the month balancing out significant failure earlier in the month.

The new reward structure, consisting of the two-tier approach should have more at stake for the provider (10% penalty) and an incentive available at 5% for over performance - *if that over performance is of benefit to the Commission services*. "Being of value" may seem a vague concept, but this is where the discussion on strategy helps determine appropriate primary and secondary measures⁴⁴.

A material breach should be linked to an industry-standard methodology, specifically when the same service level is breached for 3 consecutive months, or when any service level is breached for 3 consecutive months. Additionally, a material breach occurs if any service level is breached for 4 consecutive months or more. These breaches should trigger a review of the service agreement and corrective actions.

8.2.2 *Other recommendations*

In addition to the above recommendations, DG COMM could also benefit from:

- A market review and identification of potential suppliers. Accepting the risk that the future call for tender may attract consultancy firms rather than specialist BPO providers, there may be benefit in considering running an RFI or expression of interest to encourage a varied pool of possible providers
- Close monitoring of the efficiency and impact of the AI features which are currently being developed and implemented by the EDCC contractor, before considering additional/new

⁴⁴ An example from the current suite of KPIs could be staff satisfaction. Does DG COMM really want to reward more satisfied staff? One would hope staff are well satisfied but it's a loosely defined measure so if it remains important it would likely be a secondary measure.

AI efforts. Should new AI not increase substantively wrap and reporting up time for phone calls and handling time for mail, additional work – especially in relation to post-call notes and automated call classification, automated information retrieval and AI powered suggestions for replies should be considered

- Considering how the knowledge base is best managed in the future. There will always be a need to use a 3rd party to supply a system, but it should be the commission's responsibility, with the required resources, to update and maintain all artefacts that are contained within the system. ITS providers will contract on the basis that the base data remains the ownership of the Commission and so it can be transferred between BPO providers or integrated into a new platform
- Considering improvement in the reporting to back offices, so that data may be used to heighten the quality of information made available to citizens, proactively on the EU institutions websites and portals. Better knowledge exchange may possibly also provide the basis for more transfer of enquiries between different EU institutions
- Reviewing the calculation model for user satisfaction, using the standard formula for Customer Satisfaction Score (CSAT⁴⁵), rather than the current calculation model. For reporting purposes the breakdowns should be provide

⁴⁵ Number of satisfied users divided by total surveyed users x100